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A LAODICEAN;
OR,
THE CASTLE OF THE DE STANCYS.

A LAODICEAN;

OR,

THE CASTLE OF THE DE STANCYS.

A STORY OF TO-DAY.

BY

THOMAS HARDY,

AUTHOR OF

"FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD," "A PAIR OF BLUE EYES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

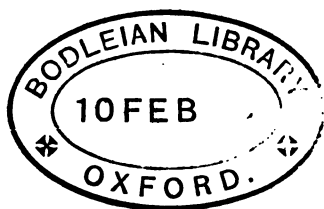
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BOOK THE SECOND

(Continued).

DARE AND HAVILL.

VOL. II.

B

A LAODICEAN ;

OR,

THE CASTLE OF THE DE STANCYS.

CHAPTER V.

ANYBODY who had closely considered Dare at this time would have discovered that, shortly after the arrival of the Royal Horse Artillery at Markton Barracks, he gave up his room at the inn at Sleeping-Green and took permanent lodgings over a broker's shop at the upper end of the town above-mentioned. The peculiarity of the rooms was that they commanded a view lengthwise of the barrack road along which any soldier, in the natural course of things, would pass either to enter the town, to call at Myrtle Villa, or to go to Stancy Castle.

Dare seemed to act as if there were plenty of time for his business. Some few days had slipped by when, perceiving Captain De Stancy walk past his window and down the town, Dare took his hat and cane, and followed in the same direction. When he was about fifty yards short of Myrtle Villa on the other side of the town he saw De Stancy enter its gate.

Dare mounted a stile beside the highway and patiently waited. In about twenty minutes De Stancy came out again and turned back in the direction of the town, till Dare was revealed to him on his left hand. When De Stancy recognized the youth he was visibly agitated, though apparently not surprised. Standing still a moment he dropped his glance upon the ground, and then came forward to Dare, who having alighted from the stile stood before the captain with a smile.

"My dear lad!" said De Stancy, much moved by recollections. He held Dare's hand for a moment in both his own, and turned askance.

"You are not astonished," said Dare, still retaining his smile, as if to his mind there were something comic in the situation.

"I knew you were somewhere near. Where do you come from?"

"From going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it, as Satan said to his Maker.—Southampton last, in common speech."

"Have you come here to see me?"

"Entirely. I divined that your next quarters would be Markton, the previous batteries that were at your station having come on here. I have wanted to see you badly."

"You have?"

"I am rather out of cash. I have been knocking about a good deal since you last heard from me."

"I will do what I can again."

"Thanks, captain."

"But Willy, I am afraid it will not be much at present. You know I am as poor as a mouse."

"But such as it is, could you write a cheque for it now?"

"I will send it to you from the barracks."

"I have a better plan. By getting over this stile we could go round at the back of the villas to Sleeping-Green Church. There is always a pen-and-ink in the vestry, and we can have a nice talk on the way. It would be unwise for me to appear at the barracks just now."

"That's true."

De Stancy sighed, and they were about to walk across the fields together. "No," said Dare, suddenly stopping. "My plans make it imperative that we should not run the risk of being seen in each other's company for long. Walk on, and I will follow. You can stroll into the churchyard, and move about as if you were ruminating on the epitaphs. There are some with excellent morals. I'll enter by the other gate, and we can meet easily in the vestry-room."

De Stancy looked gloomy, and was on the point of acquiescing when he turned back and said, "Why should your photograph be shown to the chief constable?"

"By whom?"

"Somerset the architect. He suspects your having broken into his office or something of the sort." De Stancy briefly related what Somerset had explained to him at the dinner-table.

"It was merely diamond cut diamond between us, on an architectural matter," murmured Dare. "Ho! and he suspects, and that's his remedy! I must be on my guard."

"I hope this is nothing serious?" asked De Stancy gravely.

"I peeped at his drawing—that's all. But since he chooses to make that use of my photograph, which I gave him in friendship, I'll make use of his, in a way he little dreams of. Well now, let's on."

A quarter of an hour later they met in the vestry of the church at Sleeping-Green.

"I have only just transferred my account to the bank here," said De Stancy, "as he took out his cheque-book, "and it will be more convenient to me at present to draw but a small sum. I will make up the balance afterwards."

When he had written it Dare glanced over

the paper and said ruefully, "It is small, dad. Well, there is all the more reason why I should broach my scheme, with a view to making such documents larger in the future."

"I shall be glad to hear of any such scheme," answered De Stancy, with a languid attempt at jocularly.

"Then here it is. The plan I have arranged for you is of the nature of a marriage."

"You are very kind!" said De Stancy, agape.

"The lady's name is Miss Paula Power, who, as you may have heard since your arrival, is in absolute possession of her father's property and estates, including Stancy Castle. As soon as I heard of her I saw what a marvellous match it would be for you, and your family; it would make a man of you, in short, and I have set my mind upon your putting no objection in the way of its accomplishment."

"But Willy, it seems to me that, of us two, it is you who exercise paternal authority?"

"True, it is for your good. Let me do it."

"Well, one must be indulgent under the circumstances, I suppose. . . . But," added De Stancy, simply, "Willy, I—don't want to marry, you know. I have lately thought that some day we may be able to live together, you and I: go off to America or New Zealand, where we are not known, and there lead a quiet, pastoral life, defying social rules and troublesome observances."

"I can't hear of it, captain," replied Dare, reprovingly. "I am what events have made me, and having fixed my mind upon getting you settled in life by this marriage, I have put things in train for it at an immense trouble to myself. If you had thought over it o' nights as much as I have, you would not say nay."

"But I ought to have married your mother if anybody. And as I have not married her, the least I can do in respect to her is to marry no other woman."

"You have some sort of duty to me, have you not, Captain De Stancy?"

"Yes, Willy, I admit that I have," the

elder replied reflectively. "And I don't think I have failed in it thus far?"

"This will be the crowning proof. Paternal affection, family pride, the noble instinct to reinstate yourself in the castle of your ancestors, all demand the step. And when you have seen the lady! She has the figure and motions of a sylph, the face of an angel, the eye of love itself. What a sight she is crossing the lawn on a sunny afternoon, or gliding airily along the corridors of the old place the De Stancys knew so well! Her lips are the softest, reddest, most distracting things you ever saw. Her hair is as soft as silk, and of the rarest, tenderest brown."

The captain moved uneasily. "Don't take the trouble to say more, Willy," he observed. "You know how I am. My cursed susceptibility to these matters has already wasted years of my life, and I don't want to make myself a fool about her too."

"You must see her."

"No, don't let me see her," De Stancy expostulated. "If she is only half so good-

looking as you say, she will drag me at her heels like a blind Samson. You are a mere youth as yet, but I may tell you that the misfortune of never having been my own master where a beautiful face was concerned obliges me to be cautious if I would preserve my peace of mind."

"Well, to my mind, Captain De Stancy, your objections seem trivial. Are those all?"

"They are all I care to mention just now to you."

"Captain! can there be secrets between us?"

De Stancy paused and looked at the lad as if his heart wished to confess what his judgment feared to tell. "There should not be—on this point," he murmured.

"Then tell me—why do you so much object to her?"

"I once vowed a vow."

"A vow!" said Dare, rather disconcerted.

"A vow of infinite solemnity. I must tell you from the beginning; perhaps you are old enough to hear it now, though you have been too young before. Your mother's life ended

in much sorrow, and it was occasioned entirely by me. In my regret for the wrong done her I swore to her that though she had not been my wife, no other woman should stand in that relationship to me ; and this to her was a sort of comfort. When she was dead my knowledge of my own plaguy impressibility, which seemed to be ineradicable—as it seems still—led me to think what safeguards I could set over myself with a view to keeping my promise to live a life of celibacy ; and among other things I determined to forswear the society, and if possible the sight, of women young and attractive, as far as I had the power to do.”

“ It is not so easy to avoid the sight of a beautiful woman if she crosses your path, I should think ? ”

“ It is not easy ; but it is possible.”

“ How ? ”

“ By directing your attention another way.”

“ But do you mean to say, captain, that you can be in a room with a pretty woman who speaks to you, and not look at her ? ”

“ I do : though mere looking has less to

do with it than mental attentiveness—allowing your thoughts to flow out in her direction—to comprehend her image.”

But it would be considered very impolite not to look at the woman or comprehend her image?”

“It would, and is. I am considered the most impolite officer in the service. I have been nicknamed the man with the averted eyes—the man with the detestable habit—the man who greets you with his shoulder, and so on. Ninety-and-nine fair women at the present moment hate me like poison and death for having persistently refused to plumb the depths of their offered eyes.”

“How can you do it, who are by nature courteous?”

“I cannot always—I break down sometimes. But upon the whole recollection holds me to it: dread of a lapse. Nothing is so potent as fear well maintained.”

De Stancy narrated these details in a grave meditative tone with his eyes on the wall, as if he were scarcely conscious of a listener.

“But haven’t you reckless moments, cap-

tain?—when you have taken a little more wine than usual, for instance?”

“I don’t take wine.”

“Oh, you are a teetotaler?”

“Not a pledged one—but I don’t touch alcohol unless I get wet, or anything of that sort.”

“Don’t you sometimes forget this vow of yours to my mother?”

“No, I wear a reminder.”

“What is that like?”

De Stancy held up his left hand, on the third finger of which appeared an iron ring.

Dare surveyed it, saying, “Yes, I have seen that before, though I never knew why you wore it. Well, I wear a reminder also, but of a different sort.”

He threw open his shirt-front, and revealed tattooed on his breast the letters DE STANCY; the same marks which Havill had seen in the bedroom by the light of the moon.

The captain rather winced at the sight. “Well, well,” he said hastily, “that’s enough. . . . Now, at any rate, you understand my objection to know Miss Power.”

"But, captain," said the lad coaxingly, as he fastened his shirt; "you forget me and the good you may do me by marrying? Surely that's a sufficient reason for a change of sentiment. This inexperienced sweet creature owns the castle and estate which bears your name, even to the furniture and pictures. She is the possessor of at least forty thousand a year—how much more I cannot say—while she lives at the rate of twelve hundred in her simplicity."

"It is very good of you to set this before me. But I prefer to go on as I am going."

"Well, I won't bore you any more with her to-day. A monk in regimentals!—'tis strange." Dare arose and was about to open the door, when, looking through the window, Captain De Stancy said, "Stop." He had perceived his father Sir William De Stancy walking among the tombstones without.

"Yes, indeed," said Dare, turning the key in the door. "It would look strange if he were to find us here."

As the old man seemed indisposed to leave the churchyard just yet they sat down again.

"What a capital card-table this green cloth would make," said Dare, as they waited. "You play, captain, I suppose?"

"Very seldom."

"The same with me. But as I enjoy a hand of cards with a friend, I don't go unprovided." Saying which, Dare drew a pack from the tail of his coat. "Shall we while away this leisure with the witching things?"

"Really, I'd rather not."

"But," coaxed the young man, "I am in the humour for it; so don't be unkind!"

"But, Willy, why do you care for these things? Cards are harmless enough in their way; but I don't like to see you carrying them in your pocket. It isn't good for you."

"It was by the merest chance I had them. Now come, just one hand, since we are prisoners. I want to show you how nicely I can play. I won't corrupt you!"

"Of course not," said De Stancy, as if ashamed of what his objection had implied. "You are not corrupt enough yourself to do that, I should hope."

The cards were dealt and they began to

play. Captain De Stancy abstractedly, and with his eyes mostly straying out of the window upon the large yew, whose boughs as they moved were distorted by the old green window-panes.

"It is better than doing nothing," said Dare, cheerfully, as the game went on. "I hope you don't dislike it?"

"Not if it pleases you," said De Stancy, listlessly.

"And the consecration of this place does not extend further than the aisle wall."

"Doesn't it?" said De Stancy, as he mechanically played out his cards. "What became of that box of books I sent you with my last cheque?"

"Well, as I hadn't time to read them, and as I knew you would not like them to be wasted, I sold them to a bloke who peruses them from morning till night. Ah, now you have lost a pony altogether—how queer! We'll double the stakes. So, as I was saying, just at the time the books came I got an inkling of this important business, and literature went to the wall."

"Important business—what?"

"The capture of this lady, to be sure."

De Stancy sighed impatiently. "I wish you were less calculating, and had more of the impulse natural to your years!"

"Game—by Jove! You have lost again, captain. That makes—let me see—nine pounds fifteen to square us."

"I owe you that?" said De Stancy, startled. "It is more than I have in cash. I must write another cheque."

"Never mind. Make it payable to yourself, and our connection will be quite unsuspected."

Captain De Stancy did as requested, and rose from his seat. Sir William, though further off, was still in the churchyard.

"How can you hesitate for a moment about this girl?" said Dare, pointing to the bent figure of the old man. "Think of the satisfaction it would be to him to see his son within the family walls again. It should be a religion with you to compass such a legitimate end as this."

"Well, well, I'll think of it," said the captain, with an impatient laugh. "You are

quite a Mephistopheles, Will—I say it to my sorrow !”

“ Would that I were in your place.”

“ Would that you were ! Fifteen years ago I might have called the chance a magnificent one.”

“ But you are a young man still, and you look younger than you are. Nobody knows our relationship, and I am not such a fool as to divulge it. Of course, if through me you reclaim this splendid possession, I should leave it to your feelings what you would do for me.”

Sir William had by this time cleared out of the churchyard, and the pair emerged from the vestry and departed. Proceeding towards Markton by the same by-path, they presently came to an eminence covered with bushes of blackthorn, and tufts of yellowing fern. From this point a good view of the woods and glades about Stancy Castle could be obtained. Dare stood still on the top and stretched out his finger ; the captain's eye followed the direction, and he saw above the many-hued foliage in the middle distance the towering keep of Paula's castle.

"That's the goal of your ambition, captain—ambition do I say?—most righteous and dutiful endeavour! How the hoary shape catches the sunlight—it is the *raison d'être* of the landscape, and its possession is coveted by a thousand hearts. Surely it is an hereditary desire of yours? You must make a point of returning to it, and appearing in the map of the future as in that of the past. I delight in this work of encouraging you, and pushing you forward towards your own. You are really very clever, you know, but—I say it with respect—how comes it that you want so much waking up?"

"Because I know the day is not so bright as it seems, my boy. However, you make a little mistake. If I care for anything on earth, I do care for that old fortress of my forefathers. I respect so little among the living that all my reverence is for my own dead. But manœuvring even for my own, as you call it, is not in my line. It is distasteful—it is positively hateful to me."

"Well, well, let it stand thus for the present. But will you refuse me one little

request—merely to see her? I'll contrive it so that she may not see you. Don't refuse me, it is the one thing I ask, and I shall think it hard if you deny me."

"Oh Will!" said the captain wearily. "Why will you plead so? No—even though your mind is particularly set upon it, I cannot see her, or bestow a thought upon her, much as I should like to gratify you."

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN they had parted Dare walked along towards Markton, with resolve on his mouth and an unscrupulous light in his prominent black eye. Could any person who had heard the previous conversation have seen him now, he would have found little difficulty in divining that, notwithstanding De Stancy's obduracy, the reinstatement of Captain De Stancy in the castle, and the possible legitimation and enrichment of himself, was still the dream of his brain. Even should any legal settlement or offspring intervene to nip the extreme development of his projects, there was abundant opportunity for his glorification. Two conditions were imperative. De Stancy must see Paula before Somerset's return. And it was necessary to have help from Havill, even if it involved letting him know all.

Whether Havill already knew all was a nice question for Mr. Dare's luminous mind. Havill had had opportunities of reading his secret, particularly on the night they occupied the same room. If so, by revealing it to Paula, Havill might utterly blast his project for the marriage. Havill, then, was at all risks to be retained as an ally.

Yet Dare would have preferred a stronger check upon his confederate than was afforded by his own knowledge of that anonymous letter and the competition trick. For were the competition lost to him, Havill would have no further interest in conciliating Miss Power ; would as soon as not let her know the secret of De Stancy's relation to him, Dare, in retaliation for the snubbing and fright he had received by the production of the revolver.

Fortune as usual helped him in his dilemma. Entering Havill's office, Dare found him sitting there ; but the drawings had all disappeared from the boards. The architect held an open letter in his hand.

"Well, what news?" said Dare.

"Miss Power has returned to the castle, Somerset is detained in London, and the competition is decided," said Havill, with a glance of quiet dubiousness.

"And you have won it?"

"No. We are bracketed—it's a tie. The judges say there is no choice between the designs—that they are singularly equal and singularly good. That she would do well to adopt either. Signed So-and-So, Fellows of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The result is that she will employ which she personally likes best. It is as if I had spun a guinea in the air and it had alighted on its edge. The least false movement will make it tails; the least wise movement heads."

"Singularly equal. Well we owe that to our nocturnal visit, which must not be known."

"Oh Lord, no!" said Havill apprehensively.

Dare felt secure of him at those words. Havill had much at stake; the slightest rumour of his trick in bringing about the

competition would be fatal to Havill's reputation ; his own position was consequently safe.

"The permanent absence of Somerset is then desirable architecturally on your account, matrimonially on mine."

"Matrimonially ? By the way—who was that captain you pointed out to me when the artillery entered the town ?"

"Captain De Stancy—son of Sir William De Stancy. He's the husband. Oh you needn't look incredulous : it is practicable ; but we won't argue that. In the first place I want him to see her, and to see her in the most love-kindling, passion-begetting circumstances that can be thought of. And he must see her surreptitiously, for he refuses to meet her."

"Let him see her going to church or chapel ?"

Dare shook his head.

"Driving out ?"

"Common-place."

"Walking in the gardens ?"

"Ditto."

“ At her toilet ? ”

“ Ah—if it were possible ! ”

“ Which it hardly is. Well, you had better think it over and make inquiries about her habits, and as to when she is in a favourable aspect for observation, as the almanacs say.”

Shortly afterwards Dare took his leave. In the evening he made it his business to sit smoking on the bole of a tree which commanded a view of the upper ward of the castle, and also of the old postern-gate, now enlarged and used as a tradesmen's entrance. It was half-past six o'clock ; the dressing-bell rang, and Dare saw a light-footed young woman hasten at the sound across the ward from the servants' quarter. A light appeared in a chamber which he knew to be Paula's dressing-room ; and there it remained half an hour, a shadow passing and repassing on the blind in the style of head-dress worn by the girl he had previously seen. The dinner-bell sounded and the light went out.

As yet it was scarcely dark out of doors, and in a few minutes Dare had the satisfaction of seeing the same young woman cross

the ward and emerge upon the slope without. This time she was bonneted, and carried a little basket in her hand. A nearer view showed her to be, as he had expected, Milly Birch, Paula's maid, who had friends living in Markton, whom she was in the habit of visiting almost every evening during the three hours of leisure which intervened between Paula's retirement from the dressing-room and return thither at ten o'clock. When the young woman had descended the road and passed into the large drive Dare rose and followed her.

"Oh, it is you, Miss Birch," said Dare, on overtaking her. "I am glad to have the pleasure of walking by your side."

"Yes, sir. Oh, it's Mr. Dare. We don't see you at the castle now, sir."

"No. And do you get a walk like this every evening when the others are at their busiest?"

"Almost every evening; that's the one return to the poor lady's-maid for losing her leisure when the others get it—in the absence of the family from home."

"Is Miss Power a hard mistress?"

"No."

"Rather fanciful than hard, I presume?"

"Just so, sir."

"And she likes to appear to advantage, no doubt."

"I suppose so," said Milly laughing. "We all do."

"When does she appear to the best advantage? When riding, or driving, or reading her book?"

"Not altogether then, if you mean the very best."

"Perhaps it is when she sits looking in the glass at herself, and you let down her hair."

"Not particularly, to my mind."

"When does she to your mind? When dressed for a dinner-party or ball?"

"She's middling, then. But there is a time when she looks more bewitching than at any. It is when she is in the gymnasium."

"Oh—gymnasium?"

"Because when she is there she wears such a pretty boy's costume, and is so charm-

ing in her movements, that you think she is a lovely youth and not a girl at all."

"When does she go to this gymnasium?"

"Not so much as she used to. Only on wet mornings now, when she can't get out for walks or drives. But she used to do it every day."

"I should like to see her there."

"Why, sir?"

"I am a poor artist, and can't afford models. To see her attitudes would be of great assistance to me in the art I love so well."

Milly shook her head. "She's very strict about the door being locked. If I were to leave it open she would dismiss me, as I should deserve."

"But consider, dear Miss Birch, the advantage to a poor artist the sight of her would be: if you could hold the door ajar it would be worth five pounds to me, and a good deal to you."

"No," said the incorruptible Milly, shaking her head. "Besides, I don't always go there with her. Oh no, I couldn't!"

Milly remained so firm at this point that Dare said no more.

When he had left her he returned to the castle grounds, and though there was not much light he had no difficulty in discovering the gymnasium, the outside of which he had observed before, without thinking to inquire its purpose. Like the erections in other parts of the shrubberies it was constructed of wood, the interstices between the framing being filled up with short billets of fir nailed diagonally. Dare, even when without a settled plan in his head, could arrange for probabilities; and wrenching out one of the billets he looked inside. It seemed to be a simple oblong apartment, fitted up with ropes, with a little dressing-closet at one end, and lighted by a skylight or lantern in the roof. Dare replaced the wood and went on his way.

Havill was smoking on his doorstep when Dare passed up the street. He held up his hand.

"Since you have been gone," said the architect, "I've hit upon something that may help you in exhibiting your lady to your

gentleman. In the summer I had orders to design a gymnasium for her, which I did ; and they say she is very clever on the ropes and bars. Now—— ”

“ I’ve discovered it. I shall contrive for him to see her there on the first wet morning, which is when she practices. What made her think of it ? ”

“ As you may have heard, she holds advanced views on social and other matters ; and in those on the higher education of women she is very strong, talking a good deal about the physical training of the Greeks, whom she adores, or did. Every philosopher and man of science who ventilates his theories in the monthly reviews has a devout listener in her ; and this subject of the physical development of her sex has had its turn with other things in her mind. So she had the place built on her very first arrival, according to the latest lights on athletics, and in imitation of those at the new colleges for women.”

“ How deuced clever of the girl ! She means to live to be a hundred.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE wet day arrived with all the promptness that might have been expected of it in this land of rains and mists. The alder bushes behind the gymnasium dripped monotonously leaf upon leaf, added to this being the purl of the shallow stream a little way off, producing a sense of satiety in watery sound. Though there was drizzle in the open meads, the rain here in the thicket was comparatively slight, and two men with fishing tackle who stood beneath one of the larger bushes found its boughs a sufficient shelter.

"We may as well walk home again as study nature here, Willy," said the taller and elder of the twain. "I feared it would continue when we started. The magnificent sport you speak of must rest for to-day."

The other looked at his watch, but made no particular reply.

"Come, let us move on. I don't like intruding into other people's grounds like this," De Stancy continued.

"We are not intruding. Anybody walks outside this fence." He indicated an iron railing newly tarred, dividing the wilder underwood amid which they stood from the inner and well-kept parts of the shrubbery, and against which the back of the gymnasium was built.

Light footsteps upon a gravel walk could be heard on the other side of the fence, and a trio of cloaked and umbrella-screened figures were for a moment discernible. They vanished behind the gymnasium; and again nothing resounded but the river murmurs and the clock-like drippings of the leafage.

"Hush!" said Dare.

"No pranks, my boy," said De Stancy, suspiciously. "You should be above them."

"And you should trust to my good sense, captain," Dare remonstrated. "I have not

indulged in a prank since the sixth year of my pilgrimage: I have found them too damaging to my interests. Well, it is not too dry here, and damp injures your health, you say. Have a pull for safety's sake." He presented a flask to De Stancy.

The artillery officer looked down at his nether garments.

"I don't break my rule without good reason," he observed.

"I am afraid that reason exists at present."

"I am afraid it does. What have you got?"

"Only a little wine."

"What wine?"

"Do try it. I call it 'the blushful Hippocrene,' that the poet describes as

'Tasting of Flora and the country green;
Dance, and Provençal song, and sun-burnt mirth.'"

De Stancy took the flask, and drank a little.

"It warms, does it not?" said Dare.

"Too much," said De Stancy with misgiving. "I have been taken unawares.

Why, it is three parts brandy, to my taste, you scamp!"

Dare put away the wine. "Now you are to see something," he said.

"Something—what is it?" Captain De Stancy regarded him with a puzzled look.

"It is quite a curiosity, and really worth seeing. Now just look in here."

The speaker advanced to the back of the building, and withdrew the wood billet from the wall.

"Will, I believe you are up to some trick," said De Stancy, not, however, suspecting the actual truth in these unsuggestive circumstances, and with a comfortable resignation, produced by the potent liquor, which would have been comical to an outsider; but which, to one who had known the history and relationship of the two speakers, would have worn a sadder significance. "I am too big a fool about you to keep you down as I ought; that's the fault of me, worse luck."

He pressed the youth's hand with a smile, went forward, and looked through the hole into the interior of the gymnasium. Dare

withdrew to some little distance, and watched Captain De Stancy's face, which presently began to change.

What was the captain seeing? A sort of optical poem.

Paula, in a pink flannel costume, was bending, wheeling, and undulating in the air like a gold-fish in its globe, sometimes ascending by her arms nearly to the lantern, then lowering herself till she swung level with the floor. Her aunt Mrs. Goodman, and Charlotte De Stancy, were sitting on camp-stools at one end, watching her gyrations, Paula occasionally addressing them with such an expression as—"Now, Aunt, look at me—and you, Charlotte—is not that shocking to your weak nerves!" when some adroit feat would be repeated, which, however, seemed to give much more pleasure to Paula herself in performing it than to Mrs. Goodman in looking on, the latter sometimes saying, "Oh, it is terrific—do not run such a risk again!"

It would have demanded the poetic passion of some joyous Elizabethan lyrist like Lodge, Nash, or Constable, to fitly phrase Paula's

presentation of herself at this moment of absolute abandonment to every muscular whim that could take possession of such a supple form. The white manilla ropes clung about the performer like snakes as she took her exercise, and the colour in her face deepened as she went on. Captain De Stancy felt that, much as he had seen in early life of beauty in woman, he had never seen beauty of such a real and living sort as this. A bitter recollection of his vow, together with a sense that to gaze on the festival of this Bona Dea was, though so pretty a sight, hardly fair or gentlemanly, would have compelled him to withdraw his eyes, had not the sportive fascination of her appearance glued them there in spite of all. And as if to complete the picture of Grace personified and add the one thing wanting to the charm which bound him, the clouds, till that time thick in the sky, broke away from the upper heaven, and allowed the noonday sun to pour down through the lantern upon her, irradiating her with a warm light that was incarnadined by her pink doublet and

hose, and reflected in upon her face. She only required a cloud to rest on instead of the green silk net which actually supported her reclining figure for the moment, to be quite Olympian; save indeed that in place of haughty effrontery there sat on her countenance only the healthful sprightliness of an English girl.

Dare had withdrawn to a point at which another path crossed the path occupied by De Stancy. Looking in a side direction, he saw Havill idling slowly up to him over the silent grass. Havill's knowledge of the appointment had brought him out to see what would come of it. When he neared Dare, but was still partially hidden by the boughs from the third of the party, the former simply pointed to De Stancy, upon which Havill still stood and peeped at him. "Is she within there?" he inquired.

Dare nodded, and whispered, "You need not have asked, if you had examined his face."

"That's true."

"A fermentation is beginning in him," said

Dare, half-pitifully ; " a purely chemical process ; and when it is complete he will probably be clear, and fiery, and sparkling, and quite another man than the good, weak, easy fellow that he was."

To precisely describe Captain De Stancy's look was impossible. A sun rising in his face, such was somewhat the effect. By watching him they could almost see the aspect of her within the wall, so accurately were her changing phases reflected in him. He seemed to forget that he was not alone.

" And is this," he murmured, in the manner of one only half apprehending himself, " and is this the end of my vow ? "

Paula was saying at this moment, " Ariel sleeps in this posture, does he not, Auntie ? " Suiting the action to the word, she flung out her arms behind her head as she lay in the green silk hammock, idly closed her pink eyelids, and swung herself to and fro.

BOOK THE THIRD.
DE STANCY.

CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN DE STANCY was a changed man. A hitherto well-repressed energy was giving him motion towards long-shunned consequences. His features were, indeed, to cursory observation, much the same as before ; though had a physiognomist chosen to study them with the closeness of an astronomer scanning the universe, he would doubtless have discerned abundant novelty.

In recent years De Stancy had been an easy, melancholy, unaspiring officer, enervated and depressed by a parental affection quite beyond his control for the graceless lad Dare—the obtrusive memento of a shadowy period in De Stancy's youth, who threatened to be the curse of his old age. Throughout a long space he had persevered in his system of

rigidly incarcerating within himself all instincts towards the opposite sex, with a resolution that would not have disgraced a much stronger man. By this habit, maintained with fair success, a chamber of his nature had been preserved intact during many later years, like the one solitary sealed-up cell occasionally retained by bees in a lobe of drained honey-comb. And thus, though he had irretrievably exhausted the relish of society, of ambition, of action, and of his profession, the love-force that he had kept immured alive was still a reproducible thing.

The sight of Paula in the gymnasium, which the judicious Dare had so carefully planned, led up to and heightened by subtle accessories, operated on De Stancy's surprised soul with a promptness almost magical.

On the evening of the self-same day, having dined as usual, he retired to his rooms, where he found a hamper of wine awaiting him. It had been anonymously sent, and the account was paid. He smiled grimly, but no longer with heaviness. In this he instantly recognised the handiwork

of Dare, who, having at last broken down the barrier which De Stancy had erected round his heart for so many years, acted like a skilled strategist, and took swift measures to follow up the advantage so tardily gained.

Captain De Stancy knew himself conquered; he knew he should yield to Paula—had indeed yielded; but there was now, in his solitude, an hour or two of reaction. He did not drink from the bottles sent. He went early to bed, and lay tossing thereon till far into the night, thinking over the collapse. His teetotalism had, with the lapse of years, unconsciously become the outward and visible sign to himself of his secret vows; and a return to its opposite, however mildly done, signified with ceremonious distinctness the formal acceptance of delectations long forsworn.

But the exceeding freshness of his feeling for Paula, which by reason of its long arrest was that of a man far under thirty, and was a wonder to himself every instant, would not long brook weighing in balances. He wished

suddenly to commit himself ; to remove the question of retreat out of the region of debate. The clock struck two : and the wish became determination. He arose, and wrapping himself in his dressing-gown went to the next room ; where he took from a shelf in the pantry several large bottles, which he carried to the window, till they stood on the sill a goodly row. There had been sufficient light in the room for him to do this without a candle. Now he softly opened the sash, and the radiance of a gibbous moon riding in the opposite sky flooded the apartment. It fell on the labels of the captain's bottles, revealing their contents to be simple aërated waters for drinking.

De Stancy looked out and listened. The guns that stood drawn up within the yard glistened in the moonlight reaching them from over the barrack-wall : there was an occasional stamp of horses in the stables ; also a measured tread of sentinels—one or more at the gates, one at the hospital, one between the wings, two at the magazine, and others further off. Recurring to his intention

he drew the corks of the mineral waters, and inverting each bottle one by one over the window-sill, heard its contents dribble in a small stream on to the gravel below.

He then opened the hamper which Dare had sent. Uncorking one of the bottles he murmured, "To Paula!" and drank a glass of the ruby liquor.

"A man again after eighteen years," he said, shutting the sash and returning to his bedroom.

The first overt result of his kindled interest in Miss Power was his saying to his sister the day after the surreptitious sight of Paula: "I am sorry, Charlotte, for a word or two I said the other day."

"Well!"

"I was rather disrespectful to your friend Miss Power."

"I don't think so—were you?"

"Yes. When we were walking in the wood, I made a stupid joke about her. . . . What does she know about me—do you ever speak of me to her?"

"Only in general terms."

"What general terms?"

"You know well enough, William ; of your idiosyncrasies and so on—that you are a bit of a woman-hater, or at least a confirmed bachelor, and have but little respect for your own family."

"I wish you had not told her that," said De Stancy with dissatisfaction.

"But I thought you always liked women to know your principles!" said Charlotte, in injured tones ; "and would particularly like her to know them, living so near."

"Yes, yes," replied her brother hastily. "Well, I ought to see her, just to show her that I am not quite a brute."

"That would be very nice!" she answered, putting her hands together in agreeable astonishment. "It is just what I have wished, though I did not dream of suggesting it after what I have heard you say. I am going to stay with her again to-morrow, and I will let her know about this."

"Don't tell her anything plainly, for heaven's sake. I really want to see the

interior of the castle : I have never entered its walls since my babyhood." He raised his eyes as he spoke to where the walls in question showed their ashlar faces over the trees.

"You might have gone over it at any time."

"Oh yes. It is only recently that I have thought much of the place : I feel now that I should like to examine the old building thoroughly, since it was for so many generations associated with our fortunes, especially as most of the old furniture is still there. My sedulous avoidance hitherto of all relating to our family vicissitudes has been, I own, stupid conduct for an intelligent being ; but impossible grapes are always sour, and I have unconsciously adopted Radical notions to obliterate disappointed hereditary instincts. But these have a trick of re-establishing themselves as one gets older, and the castle and what it contains have a keen interest for me now."

"It contains Paula."

De Stancy's pulse, which had been beating

languidly for many years, beat double at the sound of that name.

"I meant furniture and pictures for the moment," he said; "but I don't mind extending the meaning to her, if you wish it."

"She is the rarest thing there."

"So you have said before." He might have added, "but never with the present effect upon me."

"The castle and our family history have as much romantic interest for her as they have for you," Charlotte went on. "She delights in visiting our tombs and effigies, and ponders over them for hours."

"Indeed!" said De Stancy, allowing his surprise to hide the satisfaction which accompanied it. "That should make us friendly. . . . Does she see many people?"

"Not many as yet. And she cannot have many staying there during the alterations."

"Ah! yes—the alterations. Didn't you say that she has had a London architect stopping there on that account? What was he—old or young?"

"He is a young man: he has been to our

house. Don't you remember you met him there ?”

“What was his name ?”

“Mr. Somerset.”

“Oh, that man ! Yes, yes, I remember.
. . . Hullo, Lottie !”

“What ?”

“Your face is as red as a peony. Now I know a secret !” Charlotte vainly endeavoured to hide her confusion. “Very well, —not a word ! I won't say more,” continued De Stancy, good-humouredly, “except that he seems to be a very nice fellow.”

De Stancy had turned the dialogue on to this little well-preserved secret of his sister's with sufficient outward lightness ; but it had been done in instinctive concealment of the disquieting start with which he had recognised that Somerset, Dare's enemy, whom he had intercepted in placing Dare's portrait into the hands of the chief constable, was a man beloved by his sister Charlotte. This novel circumstance might lead to a curious complication. But he was to hear more.

“He may be very nice,” replied Charlotte,

with an effort, after this silence. "But he is nothing to me, more than a very good friend."

"There's no engagement, or thought of one between you?"

"Certainly there's not!" said Charlotte, with brave emphasis. "It is more likely to be between Paula and him than me and him."

De Stancy's bare military ears and closely cropped poll flushed hot. "Miss Power and him?"

"I don't mean to say there is, because Paula denies it; but I mean that he loves Paula. That I do know."

De Stancy was dumb. This item of news which Dare had kept from him, not knowing how far De Stancy's sense of honour might extend, was decidedly grave. Indeed, he was so greatly impressed with the fact, that he could not help saying as much aloud: "This is very serious!"

"Why?" she murmured tremblingly, for the first leaking out of her tender and sworn secret had disabled her quite.

"Because I love Paula too."

"What do you say, William, you?—a woman you have never seen?"

"I have seen her—by accident. And now, my dear little sis, you will be my close ally, won't you? as I will be yours, as brother and sister should be." He placed his arm coaxingly round Charlotte's shoulder.

"Oh, William, how can I?" at last she stammered.

"Why, how can't you? I should say. We are both in the same ship. I love Paula, you love Mr. Somerset; it behoves both of us to see that this flirtation of theirs ends in nothing."

"I don't like you to put it like that—that I love him—it frightens me," murmured the girl, visibly agitated. "I don't want to divide him from Paula; I couldn't, I wouldn't do anything to separate them. Believe me, Will, I could not! I am sorry you love there also, though I should be glad if it happened in the natural order of events that she should come round to you. But I cannot do anything to part them and make Mr. Somerset suffer. It would be *too* wrong and blamable."

"Now, you silly Charlotte, that's just how you women fly off at a tangent. I mean nothing dishonourable in the least. Have I ever prompted you to do anything dishonourable? Fair fighting allies was all I thought of."

Miss De Stancy breathed more freely. "Yes, we will be that, of course; we are always that, William. But I hope I can be your ally, and be quite neutral; I would so much rather."

"Well, I suppose it will not be a breach of your precious neutrality if you get me invited to see the castle?"

"Oh no!" she said brightly; "I don't mind doing such a thing as that. Why not come with me to-morrow? I will say I am going to bring you. There will be no trouble at all."

De Stancy readily agreed. The instant effect upon him of the information now acquired was to intensify his ardour tenfold.

The stimulus was no doubt partly due to a perception that Somerset, with a little more knowledge, would have in his hands a card which could be played with disastrous effect

against himself. Were his relationship to Dare once discovered by Somerset, in the latter's already manifested doubt of Dare's personal character, he would, without question, be stimulated by the heat of rivalry to disclose that relationship instantly. Nay—and it added yet more excitement to this game to know it, though the pang was so much the greater—Dare's character was of a kind to justify such an exposure by any man of common probity, without the stimulus of rivalry. And to a lady of such Puritan antecedents as Paula's this would probably mean her immediate severance from himself as an unclean thing.

“Is Miss Power a severe pietist, or precisian ; or is she a compromising lady ?” he asked abruptly.

“She is severe and uncompromising—if you mean in her judgments on morals,” said Charlotte, not quite hearing. The remark was peculiarly apposite, and De Stancy was silent.

He spent some following hours in a close study of the castle history, which till now had

unutterably bored him. More particularly did he dwell over documents and notes which referred to the pedigree of his own family. He wrote out the names of all—and they were many—who had been born within those domineering walls since their first erection ; of those among them who had been brought thither by marriage with the owner, and of stranger knights and gentlemen, fewer, yet more interesting in present circumstances, who had entered the castle by marriage with its mistress. He refreshed his memory on the strange loves and hates that had arisen in the course of the family history ; on memorable attacks, and the dates of the same, the most memorable among them being the occasion on which the party represented by Paula battered down the castle walls that she was now about to mend, and, as he hoped, return in their original intact shape to the family dispossessed, by marriage with himself, its living representative.

In Sir William's villa were small engravings after many of the portraits in the castle galleries, some of them hanging in the dining-

room in plain maple frames, and others preserved in portfolios. De Stancy spent much of his time over these, and in getting up the romances of their originals' lives from memoirs and other records, all which stories were as great novelties to him as they could possibly be to any stranger. Most interesting to him was the life of an Edward De Stancy, who had lived just before the Civil Wars, and to whom Captain De Stancy bore a very traceable likeness. This ancestor had a mole on his cheek, black and distinct as a fly in cream ; and as in the case of the first Lord Amherst's wart, and Bennet, Earl of Arlington's nose-scar, the painter had faithfully reproduced the defect on canvas. It so happened that the captain had a mole, though not exactly on the same spot of his face ; and this made the resemblance still greater.

He took infinite trouble with his dress that day, showing an amount of anxiety on the matter which for him was quite abnormal. At last, when fully equipped, he set out with his sister to make the call proposed. Charlotte was rather unhappy at sight of her

brother's earnest attempt to make an impression on Paula ; but she could say nothing against it, and they proceeded on their way.

It was the darkest of November weather, when the days are so short that morning seems to join with evening without the intervention of noon. The sky was lined with low cloud, within whose dense substance tempests were slowly fermenting for the coming days. Even now a windy turbulence troubled the half-naked boughs, and a lonely leaf would occasionally spin downwards to rejoin on the grass the scathed multitude of its comrades which had preceded it in its fall. The river by the pavilion, in the summer so clear and purling, now slid onwards brown and thick and silent, and enlarged to double size.

CHAPTER II.

MEANWHILE Paula was alone. Of any one else it would have been said that she was finding the afternoon rather dreary in the vast halls not of her forefathers; but of Miss Power it was unsafe to predicate so surely. She walked from room to room in a black velvet dress which gave decision to her outline without depriving it of softness. She occasionally clasped her hands behind her head and looked out of a window; but she more particularly bent her footsteps up and down the Long Gallery, where she had caused a large fire of logs to be kindled, in her endeavour to extend cheerfulness somewhat beyond the precincts of the sitting-rooms.

The fire glanced up on Paula, and Paula

glanced down at the fire, and at the gnarled beech fuel, and at the wood-lice which ran out from beneath the bark to the extremity of the logs, as the heat approached them. The low-down ruddy light spread over the dark floor like the setting sun over a moor, fluttering on the grotesque countenances of the bright andirons, and touching all the furniture on the underside.

She now and then crossed to one of the deep embrasures of the windows, to decipher some sentence from a letter she held in her hand. The daylight would have been more than sufficient for any bystander to discern that the capitals in that letter were of the peculiar semi-gothic type affected at the time by Somerset and other young architects of his school in their epistolary correspondence. She was very possibly thinking of him, even when not reading his letter, for the expression of softness with which she perused the page was more or less with her when she appeared to examine other things.

She walked about for a little time longer, then put away the letter, looked at the clock,

and thence returned to the windows, straining her eyes over the landscape without, as she murmured, "I wish Charlotte was not so long coming!"

As Charlotte continued to keep away, Paula became less reasonable in her desires, and proceeded to wish that Somerset would arrive; then that anybody would come; then, walking towards the portraits on the wall, she flippantly asked one of those cavaliers to oblige her fancy for company by stepping down from his frame. The temerity of the request led her to prudently withdraw it almost as soon as conceived: old paintings had been said to play queer tricks in extreme cases, and the shadows this afternoon were funereal enough for anything in the shape of revenge on an intruder who embodied the antagonistic modern spirit to such an extent as she. However, Paula still stood before the picture which had attracted her; and this, by a coincidence common enough in fact, though scarcely credited in chronicles, happened to be that one of the seventeenth-century portraits of which De

Stancy had studied the engraved copy at Myrtle Villa the same morning.

Whilst she remained before the picture, wondering her favourite wonder, how would she feel if this and its accompanying canvases were pictures of her own ancestors, she was surprised by a light footstep upon the carpet which covered part of the room, and turning quickly she beheld the smiling little figure of Charlotte De Stancy.

"What has made you so late?" said Paula. "You are come to stay, of course?"

Charlotte said she had come to stay. "But I have brought somebody with me!"

"Ah—whom?"

"My brother happened to be at home, and I have brought him."

Miss De Stancy's brother had been so continuously absent from home in India, or elsewhere, so little spoken of, and, when spoken of, so truly though unconsciously represented as one whose interests lay wholly outside this antiquated neighbourhood, that to Paula he had been a mere nebulosity whom she had never distinctly outlined. To have him thus

cohere into substance at a moment's notice lent him the novelty of a new creation.

"Is he in the drawing-room?" said Paula in a low voice.

"No, he is here. He would follow me. I hope you will forgive him."

And then Paula saw emerge into the red beams of the dancing fire, from behind a half-drawn hanging which screened the door, the military gentleman whose acquaintance the reader has already made.

"You know the house, doubtless, Captain De Stancy?" said Paula, somewhat shyly, when he had been presented to her.

"I have never seen the inside since I was three weeks old," replied the artillery officer gracefully; "and hence my recollections of it are not remarkably distinct. A year or two before I was born the entail was cut off by my father and grandfather; so that I saw the venerable place only to lose it; at least, I believe that's the truth of the case. But my knowledge of the transaction is not profound, and it is a delicate point on which to question one's father."

Paula assented, and looked at the interesting and noble figure of the man whose parents had seemingly righted themselves at the expense of wronging him.

"The pictures and furniture were sold about the same time, I think?" said Charlotte.

"Yes," murmured De Stancy. "They went in a mad bargain of my father with his visitor, as they sat over their wine. My father sat down as host on that occasion, and arose as guest."

He seemed to speak with such a courteous absence of regret for the alienation, that Paula, who was always fearing that the recollection would rise as a painful shadow between herself and the De Stancys, felt reassured by his magnanimity.

De Stancy looked with interest round the gallery; seeing which Paula said she would have lights brought in a moment.

"No, please not," said De Stancy. "The room and ourselves are of so much more interesting a colour by this light!"

As they moved hither and thither, the

various expressions of De Stancy's face made themselves picturesquely visible in the unsteady shine of the blaze. In a short time he had drawn near to the painting of the ancestor whom he so greatly resembled. When her quick eye noted the speck on the face, indicative of inherited traits strongly pronounced, a new and romantic feeling that the De Stancys had stretched out a tentacle from their genealogical tree to seize her by the hand and draw her in to their mass took possession of Paula. As has been said, the De Stancys were a family on whom the hallmark of membership was deeply stamped, and by the present light the representative under the portrait and the representative in the portrait seemed beings not far removed. Paula was continually starting from a reverie and speaking irrelevantly, as if such reflections as those seized hold of her in spite of her natural unconcern.

When candles were brought in Captain De Stancy ardently contrived to make the pictures the theme of conversation. From the nearest they went to the next, whereupon

Paula as hostess took up one of the candlesticks and held it aloft to light up the painting. The candlestick being tall and heavy, De Stancy relieved her of it, and taking another candle in the other hand, he imperceptibly slid into the position of exhibitor rather than spectator. Thus he walked in advance, holding the two candles on high, his shadow forming a gigantic figure on the neighbouring wall, while he recited the particulars of family history pertaining to each portrait, that he had learnt up with such eager persistence during the previous four-and-twenty hours.

"I have often wondered what could have been the history of this lady, but nobody has ever been able to tell me," Paula observed, pointing to a Vandyck which represented a beautiful woman wearing curls across her forehead, a square-cut bodice, and a heavy pearl necklace upon the smooth expanse of her neck.

"I don't think anybody knows," Charlotte said.

"Oh yes," replied her brother promptly,

seeing with enthusiasm that it was yet another opportunity for making capital of his acquired knowledge, with which he felt himself as inconveniently crammed as a candidate for a government examination. "That lady has been largely celebrated under a fancy name, though she is comparatively little known by her own. Her parents were the chief ornaments of the almost irreproachable court of Charles the First, and were not more distinguished by their politeness and honour than by the affections and virtues which constitute the great charm of private life."

The stock verbiage of the family memoir was somewhat apparent in this effusion; but it much impressed his listeners; and he went on to point out that from the lady's necklace was suspended a heart-shaped portrait—that of the man who broke his heart by her persistent refusal to encourage his suit. De Stancy then led them a little further, where hung a portrait of the lover, one of his own family, who appeared in full panoply of plate mail, the pommel of his sword standing up under his elbow. The gallant captain then

related how this personage of his line wooed the lady fruitlessly ; how, after her marriage with another, she and her husband visited the parents of the disappointed lover, the then occupiers of the castle ; how, in a fit of desperation at the sight of her, he retired to his room, where he composed some passionate verses, which he wrote with his blood, and after directing them to her ran himself through the body with his sword. Too late the lady's heart was touched by his devotion ; she was ever after a melancholy woman, and wore his portrait despite her husband's prohibition. " This," continued De Stancy, leading them through the doorway into the hall where the coats of mail were arranged along the wall, and stopping opposite a suit which bore some resemblance to that of the portrait, " this is his armour, as you will perceive by comparing it with the picture, and this is the sword with which he did the rash deed."

" What unreasonable devotion !" said Paula practically. " It was too romantic of him. She was not worthy of such a sacrifice."

"He also is one whom they say you resemble a little in feature, I think," said Charlotte.

"Do they?" replied De Stancy. "I wonder if it's true." He set down the candles, and asking the girls to withdraw for a moment, was inside the upper part of the suit of armour in incredibly quick time. Going then and placing himself in front of a low-hanging painting near the original, so as to be enclosed by the frame while covering the figure, arranging the sword as in the one above, and setting the light that it might fall in the right direction, he recalled them; when he put the question, "Is the resemblance strong?"

He looked so much like a man of bygone times that neither of them replied, but remained curiously gazing at him. His modern and comparatively sallow complexion, as seen through the open visor, lent an ethereal ideality to his appearance which the time-stained countenance of the original warrior totally lacked.

At last Paula spoke, so stilly that she

seemed a statue enunciating : "Are the verses known that he wrote with his blood?"

"Oh yes, they have been carefully preserved." Captain De Stancy, with true wooer's instinct, had committed some of them to memory that morning from the printed copy. "I fear I don't remember them all," he said, "but they begin in this way :

'From one that dyeth in his discontent,
Dear Faire, receive this greeting to thee sent ;
And still as oft as it is read by thee,
Then with some deep sad sigh remember mee !

O 'twas my fortune's error to vow dutie,
To one that bears defiance in her beautie !
Sweete poyson, precious wooe, infectious jewell—
Such is a Ladie that is faire and cruell.

How well could I with ayre, camelion-like,
Live happie, and still gazeing on thy cheeke,
In which, forsaken man, meethink I see
How goodlie Love doth threaten cares to mee.

Why dost thou frowne thus on a kneelinge soule,
Whose faultes in love thou may'st as well controule?—
In love—but O, that word ; that word I feare
Is hatefull still both to thy hart and eare !

* * * * *

Ladie, in breefe, my fate doth now intend
The period of my daies to have an end :
Waste not on mee thy pittie, pretious Faire :
Rest you in much content ; I, in despaire !”

A solemn silence followed the close of the recital, which De Stancy improved by turning the point of the sword to his breast, resting the pommel upon the floor, and saying :

“After writing that we may picture him turning this same sword in this same way, and falling on it thus.” He inclined his body forward as he spoke.

“Don’t, Captain De Stancy, please don’t!” cried Paula, involuntarily.

“No, don’t show us any further, William!” said his sister. “It is too tragic.”

De Stancy put away the sword, himself rather excited—not, however, by his own recital, but by the direct gaze of Paula at him.

This Protean quality of De Stancy’s, by means of which he could assume the shape and situation of almost any ancestor at will, had impressed her, and he perceived it with a throb of fervour. But it had done no more

than impress her; for though in delivering the lines he had so fixed his look upon her as to suggest, to any maiden practised in the game of the eyes, a present significance in the words, the idea of any such double-entendre had by no means commended itself to her soul.

At this time a messenger from Markton barracks arrived at the castle and wished to speak to Captain De Stancy in the hall. Begging the two ladies to excuse him for a moment the captain went out.

While De Stancy was talking in the twilight to the messenger at one end of the apartment, some other arrival was shown in by the side door, and in making his way after the conference across the hall to the room he had previously quitted, De Stancy encountered the new-comer. There was just enough light to reveal the countenance to be Dare's; he bore a portfolio under his arm, and had begun to wear a moustache, in case the chief constable should meet him anywhere in his rambles, and be struck by his resemblance to the man in the studio.

"What the devil are you doing here?" said Captain De Stancy, in tones he had never used before to the young man.

Dare started back in surprise, and naturally so. De Stancy, having adopted a new system of living, and relinquished the meagre diet and enervating waters of his past years, was rapidly recovering tone. His voice was firmer, his cheeks were less pallid; and above all, he was authoritative towards his present companion, whose ingenuity in vamping up a Frankenstein for his ambitious experiments seemed likely to be rewarded by his discomfiture at the hands of his own creature.

"What the devil are you doing here, I say?" repeated De Stancy.

"You can talk to me like that, after my working so hard to get you on in life, and make a rising man of you!" expostulated Dare, like one who felt himself no longer the protagonist in this enterprise.

"But," said the captain less harshly, "if you let them discover any relations between us here, you will ruin the fairest prospects man ever had!"

"Oh, I like that, captain—when you owe all of it to me!"

"That's too cool, Will."

"No; what I say is true. However, let that go. So now you are here on a call; but how are you going to get here often enough to win her before the other man comes back? If you don't see her every day—twice, three times a day—you will not capture her in the time."

"I must think of that," said De Stancy.

"There is only one way of being constantly here: you must come to copy the pictures or furniture, something in the way he did."

"I'll think of it," muttered De Stancy, hastily, as he heard the voices of the ladies, whom he hastened to join as they were appearing at the other end of the room. His countenance was gloomy as he recrossed the hall, for Dare's words on the shortness of his opportunities had impressed him. Almost at once he uttered a hope to Paula that he might have further chance of studying, and if possible of copying, some of the ancestral faces with which the building abounded.

Meanwhile Dare had come forward with his portfolio, which proved to be full of photographs. While Paula and Charlotte were examining them he said to De Stancy, as a stranger: "Excuse my interruption, sir, but if you should think of copying any of the portraits, as you were stating just now to the ladies, my patent photographic process is at your service, and is, I believe, the only one which would be effectual in the dim indoor lights."

"It is just what I was thinking of," said De Stancy, now so far cooled down from his irritation as to be quite ready to accept Dare's adroitly suggested scheme for frequenting Paula's halls.

On application to Paula she immediately gave De Stancy permission to photograph to any extent, and told Dare he might bring his instruments as soon as Captain De Stancy required them.

"Don't stare at her in such a brazen way!" whispered that officer to the young man, when Paula had withdrawn a few steps. "Say, 'I shall value the privilege highly

of assisting Captain De Stancy in such a work.'"

Dare obeyed, and before leaving De Stancy arranged to begin performing on his venerated forefathers the next morning, the youth so accidentally engaged agreeing to be there at the same time to assist in the technical operations.

CHAPTER III.

As he had promised, De Stancy made use the next day of the coveted permission that had been brought about by the ingenious Dare. Dare's second timely suggestion of tendering assistance himself had the practical result of relieving the other of all necessity for occupying his time with the proceeding, further than to bestow a perfunctory superintendence now and then, to give a colour to his regular presence in the fortress, the actual work of taking copies being carried on by the younger man.

The weather was frequently wet during these operations, and Paula, Miss De Stancy, and her brother, were often in the house whole mornings together. By constant urging and coaxing the latter would induce his gentle sister, much against her conscience, to leave

him opportunities for speaking to Paula alone. It was mostly before some print or painting that these conversations occurred, while De Stancy was ostensibly occupied with its merits, or in giving directions to his photographer how to proceed. As soon as the dialogue began, the latter would withdraw out of earshot, leaving Paula to imagine him the most deferential young artist in the world.

"You will soon possess duplicates of the whole gallery," she said on one of these occasions, examining some curled sheets which Dare had printed off from the negatives.

"No," said the soldier. "I shall not have patience to go on. I get ill-humoured, and indifferent, and then leave off."

"Why ill-humoured?"

"I scarcely know—more than that I acquire a general sense of my own family's want of merit through seeing how meritorious the people are around me. I see them happy and thriving without any necessity for me at all; and then I regard these canvas grandfathers and grandmothers, and ask, "Why

was a line so antiquated and out of date prolonged till now?"

She chid him good-naturedly for such views. "They will do you an injury," she declared. "Do spare yourself, Captain De Stancy!"

De Stancy shook his head as he turned the painting before him a little further to the light.

"But, do you know," said Paula, "that notion of yours of being a family out of date is delightful to some people. I talk to Charlotte about it often. I am never weary of examining those canopied effigies in the church, and almost wish they were those of my relations."

"I will try to see things in the same light for your sake," said De Stancy, fervently.

"Not for my sake; for your own was what I meant, of course," she replied, with a repressive air.

Captain De Stancy bowed.

"What are you going to do with your photographs when you have them?" she asked, as if still anxious to obliterate the previous sentimental lapse.

"I shall put them into a large album, and carry them with me in my campaigns; and may I ask, now I have an opportunity, that you would extend your permission to copy a little further, and let me photograph one other painting that hangs in the castle, to fittingly complete my set?"

"Which?"

"That half-length of a lady which hangs in the morning-room. I remember seeing it in the Academy last year."

Paula involuntarily closed herself up. The picture was her own portrait. "It does not belong to your series," she said somewhat coldly.

De Stancy's secret thought was, I hope from my soul it will belong some day! He answered with mildness: "There is a sort of connection—you are my sister's friend."

Paula assented.

"And hence, might not your friend's brother photograph your picture?"

Paula demurred.

A gentle sigh rose from the bosom of De Stancy. "What is to become of me?"

he said, with a light distressed laugh. "I am always inconsiderate and inclined to ask too much. Forgive me! What was in my mind when I asked I dare not say."

"I quite understand your interest in your family pictures—and all of it," she remarked more gently, willing not to hurt the sensitive feelings of a man so full of romance.

"And in that *one!*" he said, looking devotedly at her. "If I had only been fortunate enough to include it with the rest, my album would indeed have been a treasure to pore over by the bivouac fire!"

"Oh, Captain De Stancy, this is provoking perseverance!" cried Paula, laughing half-crossly. "I expected that after expressing my decision so plainly the first time I should not have been further urged upon the subject." Saying which she turned and moved decisively away.

It had not been a productive meeting, thus far. "One word!" said De Stancy, following and almost dropping on one knee. "I have given offence, I know; but do let it all fall on my own head—don't tell my sister of

my misbehaviour! She loves you deeply, and it would wound her to the heart."

"You deserve to be told upon," said Paula as she withdrew, with just enough playfulness to show that her anger was not too serious.

Charlotte looked at Paula uneasily when the latter joined her in the drawing-room. She wanted to say, "What is the matter?" but guessing that her brother had something to do with it, forbore to speak at first. But she could not contain her anxiety long. "Were you talking with my brother?" she said.

"Yes," returned Paula, with reservation. However she soon added, "he not only wants to photograph his ancestors, but *my* portrait too. They are a dreadfully encroaching sex, and perhaps being in the army makes them worse!"

"I'll give him a hint, and tell him to be careful."

"Don't say I have definitely complained of him; it is not worth while to do that; the matter is too trifling for repetition.

Upon the whole, Charlotte, I would rather you said nothing at all."

De Stancy's hobby of photographing his ancestors seemed to become a perfect mania with him. Almost every morning discovered him in the larger apartments of the castle, taking down and rehangng the dilapidated pictures, with the assistance of the indispensable Dare; his fingers stained black with dust, and his face expressing a busy attention to the work in hand, though always reserving a look askance for the presence of Paula.

Thus much must be said for Captain De Stancy; that though there was something of subterfuge, there was no double subterfuge in all this. It is true that he took no particular interest in his ancestral portraits; but he was enamoured of Paula to weakness. Perhaps the composition of his love would hardly bear looking into, but it was passionately frank and not quite mercenary. His photographic scheme was nothing worse than a lover's not too scrupulous contrivance. After the refusal of his request to copy her

picture he fumed and fretted at the prospect of Somerset's return before any impression had been made on her heart by himself; he swore at Dare, and asked him hotly why he had dragged him into such a hopeless dilemma as this.

"Hopeless? Somerset must still be kept away, so that it is not hopeless. I will consider how to prolong his stay."

Thereupon Dare considered.

The time was coming—had indeed come—when it was necessary for Paula to make up her mind about her architect, if she meant to begin building in the spring. The two sets of plans, Somerset's and Havill's, were hanging on the walls of the room that had been used by Somerset as his studio, and were accessible by anybody. Dare took occasion to go and study both sets, with a view to finding a flaw in Somerset's which might have been passed over unnoticed by the committee of architects, owing to their absence from the actual site. But not a blunder could he find.

He next went to Havill; and here he

was met by an amazing state of affairs. Havill's creditors, at last suspecting something mythical in Havill's assurance that the grand commission was his, had lost all patience ; his house was turned upside-down, and a poster gleamed on the front wall, stating that the excellent modern household furniture was to be sold by auction on Friday next. As an illustration of the truism that troubles come in battalions, Dare was informed by a bystander that Havill's wife was seriously ill also.

Without staying for a moment to enter his friend's house, back went Mr. Dare to the castle, and told Captain De Stancy of the architect's desperate circumstances, begging him to convey the news in some way to Miss Power. Though Dare's object in making this request was purely to bring about that which actually resulted from it, De Stancy, being a simpler character, promised to make representations in the proper quarter without perceiving that he was doing the best possible deed for himself thereby.

De Stancy told Paula of Havill's mis-

fortunes in the presence of his sister, who turned pale. With a woman's quickness she had discerned how this misfortune would bear upon the undecided competition.

"Poor man," murmured Paula. "He was my father's architect, and somehow expected, though I did not promise it, the work of rebuilding the castle."

Then De Stancy saw Dare's aim, and, seeing it, concurred: Somerset was his rival, and all was fair. "And is he not to have the work of the castle after expecting it?" he asked with simplicity of tone.

Paula was lost in reflection. "The other architect's design and Mr. Havill's are exactly equal in merit, and we cannot decide how to give it to either," explained Charlotte.

"That is our difficulty," Paula murmured. "A bankrupt, and his wife ill—dear me! I wonder what's the cause."

"He has borrowed on the expectation of having to execute the castle works, and now he is unable to meet his liabilities."

"It is very sad," said Paula.

"Let me suggest a remedy for this deadlock," said De Stancy.

"Do," said Paula.

"Do the work of building in two halves or sections. Give Havill the first half, since he is in need ; when that is finished, the second half can be given to your London architect. If, as I understand, the plans are identical except in ornamental details, there will be no difficulty about it at all."

Paula sighed—just a little one ; and yet the suggestion seemed to satisfy her by its reasonableness. She turned sad, wayward, and yet was impressed by De Stancy's manner and words. She appeared indeed to have a smouldering desire to please him. In the afternoon she said to Charlotte, "I mean to do as your brother says."

A note was despatched to Havill that very day, and in an hour the crestfallen architect presented himself at the castle. Paula instantly gave him audience, commiserated him, and commissioned him to carry out a first section of the buildings, comprising work to the extent of about twenty thousand pounds expenditure ; and then, with a prematureness quite phenomenal among archi-

pects' clients, she handed him over a cheque for five hundred pounds on account.

When he had gone, Paula's bearing showed some sign of her being disquieted at what she had done ; but she covered her mood under a cloak of saucy serenity. Perhaps a tender remembrance of a certain thunderstorm in the foregoing August, when she stood with Somerset in the harbour, and did not own that she loved him, was pressing on her memory, and bewildering her. She had not seen quite clearly, in adopting De Stancy's suggestion, that Somerset would now have no professional reason for being at the castle for the next twelve months.

But the captain had, and when Havill entered the castle he rejoiced with great joy. Dare, too, rejoiced in his cold way, and went on with his photography, saying, " The game progresses, captain."

" Game ? Call it Divine Comedy, rather !" said the captain, exultingly.

" He is practically banished for a year or more. What can't you do in a year, captain !"

Havill, in the mean time, having respectfully withdrawn from the presence of Paula, passed by Dare and De Stancy in the gallery as he had done in entering. He spoke a few words to Dare, who congratulated him. While they were talking somebody was heard in the hall, inquiring hastily for Mr. Havill.

"What shall I tell him?" demanded the porter.

"His wife is dead," said the messenger.

Havill overheard the words, and hastened away.

"An unlucky man!" said Dare.

"That, happily for us, will not affect his installation here," said De Stancy. "Now hold your tongue and keep at a distance. She may come this way."

Surely enough in a few minutes she came. De Stancy, to make conversation, told her of the new misfortune which had just befallen Mr. Havill.

Paula was very sorry to hear it, and remarked that it gave her great satisfaction to have appointed him as architect of the first

wing before he learnt the bad news. "I owe you best thanks, Captain De Stancy, for showing me such an expedient."

"Do I really deserve thanks?" asked De Stancy with a meditative smile upon her. "I wish I deserved a reward; but I must bear in mind the fable of the priest and the jester."

"I never heard it."

"The jester implored the priest for alms, but the smallest sum was refused, though the holy man readily agreed to give him his blessing. Query, its value?"

"How does it apply?"

"You give me unlimited thanks, but deny me the tiniest substantial trifle I desire."

"What persistence!" exclaimed Paula, colouring. "Very well, if you *will* photograph my picture you must. It is really not worthy further pleading. Take it when you like."

When Paula was alone she seemed vexed with herself for having given way; and rising from her seat she went quietly to the door of the room containing the picture, intending to

lock it up till further consideration, whatever he might think of her. But on casting her eyes round the apartment the painting was gone. The captain, wisely taking the current when it served, already had it in the gallery, where he was to be seen bending attentively over it, arranging the lights and directing Dare with the instruments. On leaving he thanked her, and said that he had obtained a splendid copy. Would she look at it?

Paula was severe and icy. "Thank you—I don't wish to see it," she said.

De Stancy bowed with civil reserve, and departed in a glow of triumph; satisfied, notwithstanding her frigidity, that he had compassed his immediate aim, which was that she might not be able to dismiss from her thoughts him and his persevering desire for the shadow of her face during the next four-and-twenty hours. And his confidence was well founded: she could not.

"I fear this Divine Comedy will be a slow business for us, captain," said Dare, who had heard her cold words.

"Oh no!" said De Stancy, flushing a little: he had not been perceiving that the lad had the measure of his mind so entirely as to gauge his position at any moment. But he would show no shamefacedness. "Even if it is, my boy," he answered, "there's plenty of time before the other can come."

At that hour and minute of De Stancy's remark "the other," to look at him, seemed indeed securely shelved. He was sitting lonely in his chambers far away, wondering why she did not write, and yet hoping to hear—wondering if it had all been but a short-lived strain of tenderness. He knew as well as if it had been stated in words that her serious acceptance of him as a suitor would be her acceptance of him as an architect—that her schemes in love would be expressed in terms of art; and conversely that her refusal of him as a lover would be neatly effected by her choosing Havill's plans for the castle, conveying to him, Somerset, the news that his design was deemed less suitable than the other, and returned with thanks.

The position was so clear : he was so well walled in by the shape of circumstances that he was absolutely helpless.

To wait for the line that would not come—the letter saying that, as she had desired, his was the design that pleased her—was still the only thing to do. The (to Somerset) surprising accident that the committee of architects should have pronounced the designs absolutely equal in point of merit, and thus have caused the final choice to revert after all to Paula, had been a joyous thing to him when he first heard of it, full of confidence in her favour. But the fact of her having again become the arbitrator, though it had made acceptance of his plans all the more probable, made refusal of them, should it happen, all the more crushing. He could have conceived himself favoured by Paula as her lover, even had the committee decided in favour of Havill as her architect. But not to be chosen as architect now was to be rejected in both kinds.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was the Sunday following the funeral of Mrs. Havill, news of whose death had been so unexpectedly brought to her husband at the moment of his exit from Stancy Castle. The minister, as was his custom, improved the occasion by a couple of sermons on the uncertainty of life. One was preached in the morning in the old chapel of Markton ; the second at evening service in the little rural chapel near Stancy Castle, built by Paula's father, which bore to the first somewhat the relation of an episcopal chapel-of-ease to the mother church.

The unscreened lights blazed through the plate-glass windows of the smaller building and outshone the steely stars of the early night, just as they had done when Somerset

was attracted by their glare four months before. The fervid minister's rhetoric equalled its force on that more romantic occasion : but Paula was not there. She was not a frequent attendant now at her father's votive building. The mysterious tank, with its dark waters that had so repelled her at the last moment, was boarded over : a table stood on its centre, with an open quarto Bible upon it ; behind which Havill, in a new suit of black, sat in a large chair. Havill held the office of deacon : and he had mechanically taken the deacon's seat as usual to-night, in the face of the congregation, and under the nose of Mr. Woodwell.

Mr. Woodwell was always glad of an opportunity. He was gifted with a burning natural eloquence, which though perhaps a little too freely employed in exciting the "Wertherism of the uncultivated" had in it genuine power. He was a master of that oratory which no limitation of knowledge can repress, and which no training can impart. The neighbouring rector could eclipse Woodwell's scholarship, and the freethinker

at the corner shop in Markton could demolish his logic; but the Baptist could do in five minutes what neither of these had done in a lifetime; he could move some of the hardest of men to tears.

Thus it happened that, when the sermon was fairly under way, Havill began to feel himself in a trying position. It was not that he had bestowed much affection upon his deceased wife, irreproachable woman as she had been; but the suddenness of her death had shaken his nerves, and Mr. Woodwell's address on the uncertainty of life involved considerations of conduct on earth that bore with singular directness upon Havill's unprincipled manœuvre for victory in the castle competition. He wished he had not been so inadvertent as to take his customary chair in the chapel. People who saw Havill's agitation did not know that it was most largely owing to his sense of the fraud which had been practised on the unoffending Somerset: and when, unable longer to endure the torture of Woodwell's words, he rose from his place and went into the chapel vestry, the

preacher little thought that remorse for a contemptibly unfair act, rather than grief for a dead wife, was the cause of the architect's withdrawal.

When Havill got into the open air his morbid excitement calmed down, but a sickening self-aborrence for the proceeding instigated by Dare did not abate. To appropriate another man's design was no more nor less than to embezzle his money or steal his goods. The intense reaction from his conduct of the past two or three months did not leave him when he reached his own house and observed where the handbills of the countermanded sale had been torn down, as the result of the payment made in advance by Paula of money which should really have been Somerset's.

The mood went on intensifying when he was in bed. He lay awake till the clock reached those still, small, ghastly hours when the vital fires burn at their lowest in the human frame, and death seizes more of his victims than in any other of the twenty-four. Havill could bear it no longer; he got a

light, went down into his office and wrote the note subjoined.

“MADAM,

“The recent death of my wife necessitates a considerable change in my professional arrangements and plans with regard to the future. One of the chief results of the change is, I regret to state, that I no longer find myself in a position to carry out the enlargement of the castle which you had so generously entrusted to my hands.

“I beg leave therefore to resign all further connection with the same, and to express, if you will allow me, a hope that the commission may be placed in the hands of the other competitor. Herewith is returned a cheque for one-half of the sum so kindly advanced in anticipation of the commission I should receive; the other half, with which I had cleared off my immediate embarrassments before perceiving the necessity for this course, shall be returned to you as soon as some payments from other clients drop in.

I beg to remain, Madam, your obedient servant,

“JAMES HAVILL.”

Havill would not trust himself till the morning to post this letter. He sealed it up, went out with it into the street, and walked through the sleeping town to the post-office. At the mouth of the box he held the letter long. By dropping it, he was dropping at least two thousand five hundred pounds which, however obtained, were now securely his. It was a great deal to let go ; and there he stood till another wave of conscience bore in upon his soul the absolute nature of the theft, and made him shudder. The footsteps of a solitary policeman could be heard nearing him along the deserted street ; hesitation ended, and he let the letter go.

When he awoke in the morning he thought over the circumstances by the cheerful light of a low eastern sun. The horrors of the situation seemed much less formidable ; yet it cannot be said that he actually regretted his act. Later on he walked out, with the

strange sense of being a man who, from one having a large professional undertaking in hand, had, by his own act, suddenly reduced himself to an unoccupied nondescript. From the upper end of the town he saw in the distance the grand grey towers of Stancy Castle looming over the leafless trees; he felt stupefied at what he had done, and said to himself with bitter discontent: "Well, well, what is more contemptible than a half-hearted rogue!"

That morning the post-bag had been brought to Paula and Mrs. Goodman in the usual way, and Miss Power read the letter. His resignation was a surprise: the question whether he would or would not repay the money was passed over; the necessity of installing Somerset after all as sole architect was an agitation, or emotion, the precise nature of which it is impossible to accurately define.

However, she went about the house after breakfast with very much the manner of one who had had a weight removed either from her heart or from her conscience; moreover,

her face was a little flushed when, in passing by Somerset's late studio, she saw the plans bearing his motto, and knew that his and not Havill's would be the presiding presence in the coming architectural turmoil. She went on further, and called to Charlotte, who was now regularly sleeping in the castle, to accompany her, and together they ascended to the telegraph-room in the donjon tower.

"Whom are you going to telegraph to?" said Miss De Stancy when they stood by the instrument.

"My architect."

"Oh—Mr. Havill."

"Mr. Somerset."

Miss De Stancy had schooled her emotions on that side cruelly well, and she asked calmly, "What, have you chosen him after all?"

"There is no choice in it—read that," said Paula, handing Havill's letter, as if she felt that Providence had stepped in to shape ends that she was too undecided or unpractised to shape for herself.

"It is very strange," murmured Charlotte;

while Paula applied herself to the machine and despatched the words :

Miss Power, Stancy Castle, to G. Somerset, Esq., F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A., Queen Anne's Chambers, St. James's :—

Your design is accepted in its entirety. It will be necessary to begin soon. I shall wish to see and consult you on the matter about the 10th instant.

When the message was fairly gone out of the window Paula seemed still further to expand. The strange spell cast over her by something or other—probably the presence of De Stancy, and the weird romanticism of his manner towards her, which was as if the historic past had touched her with a yet living hand—in a great measure became dissipated, leaving her the arch and serene maiden that she was before.

About this time Captain De Stancy and his Achates were approaching the castle, and had arrived about fifty paces from the spot at which it was Dare's custom to drop behind his companion, in order that their appearance at the lodge should be that of master and man.

Dare was saying, as he had said before :
"I can't help fancying, captain, that your approach to this castle and its mistress is by a very tedious system. Your trenches, zig-zags, counterscarps, and ravelins may be all very well, and a very sure system of attack in the long run ; but upon my soul they are almost as slow in maturing as those of Uncle Toby himself. For my part I should be inclined to try an assault."

"Don't pretend to give advice, Willy, on matters beyond your years."

"I only meant it for your good, and your proper advancement in the world," said Dare in wounded tones.

"Different characters, different systems," returned the captain. "This lady is of a reticent, independent, complicated disposition, and any sudden proceeding would put her on her mettle. You don't dream what my impatience is, my boy. It is a thing transcending your utmost conceptions ! But I proceed slowly ; I know better than to do otherwise. Thank God there is plenty of time. As long as there is no risk of Somerset's return my situation is sure."

"And professional etiquette will prevent him coming yet. Havill and he will be like the men in the weather-house; when Havill walks out, he'll walk in, and not a moment before."

"That will not be till eighteen months have passed. And, as the Jesuit said, 'Time and I against any two.' . . . Now drop to the rear," added Captain De Stancy authoritatively. And they passed under the walls of the castle.

The grave fronts and bastions were wrapped in silence; so much so that, standing a while in the inner ward, they could hear through an open window a faintly clicking sound from within.

"She's at the telegraph," said Dare, throwing forward his voice softly to the captain. "What can that be for so early? That wire is a nuisance, to my mind; such constant intercourse with the outer world is bad for our romance."

The speaker entered to arrange his photographic apparatus, of which, in truth, he was getting weary; and De Stancy smoked on

the terrace till Dare should be ready. While he waited his sister looked out upon him from an upper casement, having caught sight of him as she came from Paula in the telegraph-room.

"Well, Lotty, what news this morning?" he said gaily.

"Nothing of importance. We are quite well." . . . She added with hesitation, "There is one piece of news; Mr. Havill—but perhaps you have heard it in Markton?"

"Nothing."

"Mr. Havill has resigned his appointment as architect to the castle."

"What?—who has it, then?"

"Mr. Somerset," she faltered.

"Appointed?"

"Yes—by telegraph."

"When is he coming?" said De Stancy in consternation.

"About the tenth, we think."

Charlotte was concerned to see her brother's face, and withdrew from the window that he might not question her further. De Stancy went into the hall, and on to the

gallery, where Dare was standing as still as a caryatid.

"I have heard every word," said Dare.

"Well, what does it mean? Has that fool Havill done it on purpose to annoy me? What conceivable reason can the man have for throwing up an appointment he has worked so hard for, at the moment he has got it, and in the time of his greatest need?"

Dare guessed, for he had seen a little way into Havill's soul during the brief period of their confederacy. But he was very far from saying what he guessed. Yet he unconsciously revealed by other words the nocturnal shades in his character which had made that confederacy possible.

"Somerset coming after all!" he replied. "By God: that little six-barrelled friend of mine, and a good resolution, and he would never arrive!"

"What!" said Captain De Stancy, paling with horror as he looked at the other and gathered his sinister meaning.

Dare instantly recollected himself. "One

is tempted to say anything at such a moment," he replied hastily.

"Since he is to come, let him come, for me," continued De Stancy, with reactionary distinctness, and still gazing gravely into the young man's face. "The battle shall be fairly fought out. Fair play, even to a rival—remember that, my boy. . . . Why are you here?—unnaturally concerning yourself with the passions of a man of my age, as if you were the parent, and I the son? Would to Heaven, Willy, you had done as I wished you to do, and led the life of a steady, thoughtful young man! Instead of meddling here, you should now have been in some studio, college, or professional man's chambers, engaged in a useful pursuit which might have made one proud to own you. But you were so precocious and headstrong; and this is what you have come to: you promise to be worthless!"

"I think I shall go to my lodgings to-day instead of staying here over these pictures," said Dare, after a silence, during which Captain De Stancy endeavoured to calm himself.

"I was going to tell you that my dinner to-day will unfortunately be one of herbs, for want of the needful. I have come to my last stiver.—You dine at the mess, I suppose, captain?"

De Stancy had walked away; but Dare knew that he played a pretty sure card in that speech. De Stancy's heart could not withstand the suggested contrast between a lonely meal of bread-and-cheese and a well-ordered dinner amid cheerful companions.—"Here," he said, emptying his pocket and returning to the lad's side. "Take this, and order yourself a good meal. You keep me as poor as a crow. There shall be more to-morrow."

The peculiarly bifold nature of Captain De Stancy, as shown in his conduct at different times, was something rare in life, and perhaps happily so. That mechanical admixture of black and white qualities without coalescence, on which the theory of men's characters was based by moral analysts before the rise of modern ethical schools, fictitious as it was in general application, would have almost

hit off the truth as regards Captain De Stancy. Removed to some half-known century, his deeds would have won a picturesqueness of light and shade that might have made him a fascinating subject for some gallery of illustrious historical personages. It was this tendency to moral chequer-work which accounted for his varied bearings towards Dare.

Dare withdrew to take his departure. When he had gone a few steps, despondent, he suddenly turned, and ran back with some excitement.

"Captain—he's coming on the tenth, don't they say? Well, four days before the tenth comes the sixth. Have you forgotten what's fixed for the sixth?"

"I had quite forgotten!"

"That day will be worth three months of quiet attentions: with luck, skill, and a bold heart, what mayn't you do?"

Captain De Stancy's face softened with satisfaction.

"There is something in that; the game is not up after all. The sixth—it had gone clean out of my head, by gad!"

CHAPTER V.

THE cheering message from Paula to Somerset sped through the loophole of Stancy Castle keep, over the trees, along the railway, under bridges, across three counties—from extreme antiquity of environment to sheer modernism—and finally landed itself on a table in Somerset's chambers in the midst of a cloud of fog. He read it and, in the moment of reaction from the depression of his past days, clapped his hands like a child.

Then he considered the date at which she wanted to see him. Had she so worded her despatch he would have gone that very day; but there was nothing to complain of in her giving him a week's notice. Pure maiden modesty might have checked her indulging in a too ardent recall.

Time, however, dragged somewhat heavily along in the interim, and on the second day he thought he would call on his father and tell him of his success in obtaining the appointment.

The elder Mr. Somerset lived in a detached house in the north-west part of fashionable London; and ascending the chief staircase the young man branched off from the first landing and entered his father's painting-room. It was an hour when he was pretty sure of finding the well-known painter at work, and on lifting the tapestry he was not disappointed, Mr. Somerset being busily engaged with his back towards the door.

Art and vitiated nature were struggling like wrestlers in that apartment, and art was getting the worst of it. The overpowering gloom pervading the clammy air, rendered still more intense by the height of the window from the floor, reduced all the pictures that were standing around to the wizened feebleness of corpses on end. The shadowy parts of the room behind the different easels were veiled in a brown vapour,

precluding all estimate of the extent of the studio, and only subdued in the foreground by the ruddy glare from an open stove of Dutch tiles. Somerset's footsteps had been so noiseless over the carpeting of the stairs and landing that his father was unaware of his presence; he continued at his work as before, which he performed by the help of a complicated apparatus of lamps, candles, and reflectors, so arranged as to eke out the miserable daylight to a power apparently sufficient for the neutral touches on which he was at that moment engaged.

The first thought of an unsophisticated stranger on entering that room could only be the amazed inquiry why a professor of the art of colour, which beyond all other arts requires pure daylight for its exercise, should fix himself on the single square league in habitable Europe to which light is denied at noonday for weeks in succession.

"Oh! it's you, George, is it?" said the Academician, turning from the lamps, which shone over his bald crown at such a slant as to reveal every cranial irregularity. "How

are you this morning? Still a dead silence about your grand castle competition?"

Somerset told the news. His father duly congratulated him, and added genially, "It is well to be you, George. One large commission to attend to, and nothing to distract you from it. I am bothered by having a dozen irons in the fire at once. And people are so unreasonable.—Only this morning, among other things, when you got your order to go on with your single study, I received a letter from a woman, an old friend whom I can scarcely refuse, begging me as a great favour to design her a set of theatrical costumes, in which she and her friends can perform for some charity. It would occupy me a good week to go into the subject and do the thing properly. Such are the sort of letters I get. I wish, George, you could knock out something for her before you leave town. It is positively impossible for me to do it with all this work in hand, and these eternal fogs to contend against."

"I fear costumes are rather out of my line," said the son. "However, I'll do what

I can. What period and country are they to represent?"

His father didn't know. He had never looked at the play of late years. It was "Love's Labour's Lost." "You had better read it for yourself," he said, "and do the best you can."

During the morning Somerset junior found time to refresh his memory of the play, and afterwards went and hunted up materials for designs to suit the same, which occupied his spare hours for the next three days. As these occupations made no great demands upon his reasoning faculties he mostly found his mind wandering off to imaginary scenes at Stancy Castle: particularly did he dwell at this time upon Paula's lively interest in the history, relics, tombs, architecture,—nay, the very Christian names, of the De Stancy line, and her "artistic" preference for Charlotte's ancestors instead of her own. Yet what more natural than that a clever meditative girl, encased in the feudal lumber of that family, should imbibe at least an antiquarian interest in it? Human nature at bottom is

romantic rather than ascetic, and the local habitation which accident had provided for Paula was perhaps acting as a solvent of the hard, morbidly introspective views thrust upon her in early life.

Somerset wondered if his own possession of a substantial genealogy like Captain De Stancy's would have had any appreciable effect upon her regard for him. His suggestion to Paula of her belonging to a worthy strain of engineers had been based on his content with his own intellectual line of descent through Phidias, Ictinus and Calli-crates, Chersiphron, Vitruvius, Wilars of Cambray, William of Wykeham, and the rest of that long and illustrious roll; but Miss Power's marked preference for an animal pedigree led him to muse on what he could show for himself in that kind.

These thoughts so far occupied him that when he took the sketches to his father, on the morning of the fifth, he was led to ask: "Has any one ever sifted out our family pedigree?"

"Family pedigree?"


"Yes. Have we any pedigree worthy to be compared with that of professedly old families? I never remember hearing of any ancestor further back than my great-grandfather."

Somerset the elder reflected and said that he believed there was a genealogical tree about the house somewhere, reaching back to a very respectable distance. "Not that I ever took much interest in it," he continued, without looking up from his canvas; "but your great-uncle John was a man with a taste for those subjects, and he drew up such a sheet: he made several copies on parchment, and gave one to each of his brothers and sisters. The one he gave to my father is still in my possession, I think."

Somerset said that he should like to see it; but half an hour's search about the house failed to discover the document; and the Academician then remembered that it was in an iron box at his banker's. He had used it as a wrapper for some bonds and other valuable papers which were deposited there for safety. "Why do you want it?" he inquired.

The young man confessed his wish to know if his own antiquity would bear comparison with that of another person, whose name he did not mention; whereupon his father gave him a key that would fit the said chest, if he meant to pursue the subject further. Somerset, however, did nothing in the matter that day, but the next morning, having to call at the bank on other business, he remembered his intention.

It was about eleven o'clock. The fog, though not so brown as it had been on previous days, was still dense enough to necessitate lights in the shops and offices. When Somerset had finished his business in the outer office of the bank he went to the manager's room. The hour being somewhat early the only persons present in that sanctuary of balances, besides the manager who welcomed him, were two gentlemen, apparently lawyers, who sat talking earnestly over a box of papers. The manager, on learning what Somerset wanted, unlocked a door from which a flight of stone steps led to the vaults, and sent down a clerk and a porter for the safe.



Before, however, they had descended far a gentle tap came to the door, and in response to an invitation to enter a lady appeared, wrapped up in furs to her very nose.

The manager seemed to recognise her, for he went across the room in a moment, and set her a chair at the middle table, replying to some observation of hers with the words, "Oh yes, certainly," in a deferential tone.

"I should like it brought up at once," said the lady.

Somerset, who had seated himself at a table in a somewhat obscure corner, screened by the lawyers, started at the words. The voice was Miss Power's, and so plainly enough was the figure as soon as he examined it. Her back was towards him, and either because the room was only lighted in two places, or because she was absorbed in her own concerns, she seemed to be unconscious of any one's presence on the scene except the banker and herself. The former called back the clerk, and two other porters having been summoned they disappeared to get whatever she required.

Somerset, somewhat excited, sat wondering what could have brought Paula to London at this juncture, and was in some doubt if the occasion were a suitable one for revealing himself, her errand to her banker being possibly of a very private nature. Nothing helped him to a decision. Paula never once turned her head, and the progress of time was marked only by the murmurs of the two lawyers, and the ceaseless clash of gold and rattle of scales from the outer room, where the busy heads of cashiers could be seen through the partition moving about under the globes of the gas-lamps.

Footsteps were heard upon the cellar-steps, and the three men previously sent below staggered from the doorway, bearing a huge safe which nearly broke them down. Somerset knew that his father's box, or boxes, could boast of no such dimensions, and he was not surprised to see the chest deposited in front of Miss Power. When the immense accumulation of dust had been cleared off the lid, and the chest conveniently placed for her, Somerset was attended to, his modest box

being brought up by one man unassisted, and without much expenditure of breath.

His interest in Paula was of so emotional a cast that his attention to his own errand was of the most perfunctory kind. She was close to a gas-standard, and the lawyers, whose seats had intervened, having finished their business and gone away, all her actions were visible to him. While he was opening his father's box the manager assisted Paula to unseal and unlock hers, and he now saw her lift from it a morocco case, which she placed on the table before her, and unfastened. Out of it she took a dazzling object that fell like a cascade over her fingers. It was a necklace of diamonds and pearls, apparently of large size and many strands, though he was not near enough to see distinctly. When satisfied by her examination that she had got the right article she shut it into its case.

The manager closed the chest for her; and when it was again secured Paula arose, tossed the necklace into her handbag, bowed to the manager, and was about to bid him

good morning. Thereupon he said with some hesitation, "Pardon one question, Miss Power. Do you intend to take those jewels far?"

"Yes," she said simply, "to Stancy Castle."

"You are going straight there?"

"I have one or two places to call at first."

"I would suggest that you carry them in some other way—by fastening them into the pocket of your dress, for instance."

"But I am going to hold the bag in my hand and never once let it go."

The banker slightly shook his head. "Suppose your carriage gets overturned: you would let it go then."

"Perhaps so."

"Or if you saw a child under the wheels just as you were stepping in; or if you accidentally stumbled in getting out; or if there was a collision on the railway—you might let it go."

"Yes; I see I was too careless. I thank you."

Paula removed the necklace from the bag, turned her back to the manager, and spent

several minutes in placing her treasure in her bosom, pinning it and otherwise making it absolutely secure.

"That's it," said the grey-haired man of caution, with evident satisfaction. "There is not much danger now : you are not travelling alone ?"

Paula replied that she was not alone, and went to the door. There was one moment during which Somerset might have conveniently made his presence known ; but the juxtaposition of the bank-manager, and his own disarranged box of securities, embarrassed him : the moment slipped by, and she was gone.

In the mean time he had mechanically unearthed the pedigree, and, locking up his father's chest, Somerset also took his departure at the heels of Paula. He walked along the misty street, so deeply musing as to be quite unconscious of the direction of his walk. What, he inquired of himself, could she want that necklace for so suddenly ? He recollected a remark of Dare's to the effect that her appearance on a particular occasion at

Stancy Castle had been magnificent by reason of the jewels she wore ; which proved that she had retained a sufficient quantity of those valuables at the castle for ordinary requirements. What exceptional occasion, then, was impending on which she wished to glorify herself beyond all previous experience ? He could not guess. He was interrupted in these conjectures by a carriage nearly passing over his toes at a crossing in Bond Street : looking up he saw between the two windows of the vehicle the profile of a thickly mantled bosom, on which a camellia rose and fell. All the remainder part of the lady's person was hidden ; but he remembered that flower of convenient season as one which had figured in the bank parlour half an hour earlier to-day.

Somerset hastened after the carriage, and in a minute saw it stop opposite a jeweller's shop. Out came Paula, and then another woman, in whom he recognised Mrs. Birch, one of the lady's-maids at Stancy Castle. The young man was at Paula's side before she had crossed the pavement.

CHAPTER VI.

A QUICK arrested expression in her two saphirine eyes, accompanied by a little, a very little, blush which loitered long, was all the outward disturbance that the sight of her lover caused. The habit of self-repression at any new emotional impact was instinctive with her always. Somerset could not say more than a word; he looked his intense solicitude, and Paula spoke.

She declared that this was an unexpected pleasure. Had he arranged to come on the tenth as she wished? How strange that they should meet thus!—and yet not strange—the world was so small.

Somerset said that he was coming on the very day she mentioned—that the appointment gave him infinite gratification, which was quite within the truth.

"Come into this shop with me," said Paula, with good-humoured authoritativeness.

They entered the shop and talked on while she made a small purchase. But not a word did Paula say of her sudden errand to town.

"I am having an exciting morning," she said. "I am going from here to catch the one-o'clock train to Markton."

"It is important that you get there this afternoon, I suppose?"

"Yes. You know why?"

"Not at all."

"The Hunt Ball. It was fixed for the sixth, and this is the sixth. I thought they might have asked you."

"No," said Somerset, a trifle gloomily. "No, I am not asked. But it is a great task for you—a long journey and a ball all in one day."

"Yes: Charlotte said that. But I don't mind it."

"You are glad you are going. Are you glad?" he said softly.

Her air confessed more than her words.

"I am not so very glad that I am going to the Hunt Ball," she replied confidentially.

"Thanks for that," said he.

She lifted her eyes to his for a moment. Her manner had suddenly become so nearly the counterpart of that in the tea-house that to suspect any deterioration of affection in her was no longer generous. It was only as if a thin layer of recent events had overlaid her memories of him, until his presence swept them away.

Somerset looked up, and finding the shopman to be still some way off, he added, "When will you assure me of something in return for what I assured you that evening in the rain?"

"Not before you have built the castle. My aunt does not know about it yet, nor anybody."

"I ought to tell her."

"No, not yet. I don't wish it."

"Then everything stands as usual?"

She lightly nodded.

"That is, I may love you: but you still will not say you love me."

She nodded again, and directing his attention to the advancing shopman, said, "Please not a word more."

Soon after this, they left the jeweller's, and parted, Paula driving straight off to the station and Somerset going on his way uncertainly happy. His re-impression after a few minutes was that a special journey to town to fetch that magnificent necklace which she had not once mentioned to him, but which was plainly to be the medium of some proud purpose with her this evening, was hardly in harmony with her assertions of indifference to the attractions of the Hunt Ball.

He got into a cab and drove to his club, where he lunched, and mopingly spent a great part of the afternoon in making calculations for the foundations of the castle works. Late in the afternoon he returned to his chambers, wishing that he could annihilate the three days remaining before the tenth, particularly this coming evening. On his table was a letter in a strange writing, and indifferently turning it over he found

from the superscription that it had been addressed to him days before at the King's Arms Hotel, Markton, where it had lain ever since, the landlord probably expecting him to return. Opening the missive he found to his surprise that it was, after all, an invitation to the Hunt Ball.

"Too late!" said Somerset. "To think I should be served this trick a second time!"

After a moment's pause, however, he looked to see the time of day. It was five minutes past five—just about the hour when Paula would be driving from Markton Station to Stancy Castle to rest and prepare herself for her evening triumph. There was a train at six o'clock, timed to reach Markton between eleven and twelve, which by great exertion he might save even now, if it were worth while to undertake such a scramble for the pleasure of dropping in to the ball at a late hour. A moment's vision of Paula moving to swift tunes on the arm of a person or persons unknown was enough to impart the impetus required. He jumped up, flung his dress suit into a portmanteau, sent down

to call a cab, and in a few minutes was rattling off to the railway which had borne Paula away from London just five hours earlier.

Once in the train, he began to consider where and how he could most conveniently dress for the dance. The train would certainly be half an hour late; half an hour would be spent in getting to the town-hall, and that was the utmost delay tolerable if he would secure the hand of Paula for one spin, or be more than a mere dummy behind the earlier arrivals. He looked for an empty compartment at the next stoppage, and finding the one next his own unoccupied, he entered it and changed his raiment for that in his portmanteau during the ensuing run of twenty miles.

Thus prepared he awaited the Markton platform, which was reached as the clock struck twelve. Somerset called a fly and drove at once to the town-hall.

The borough natives had ascended to their upper floors, and were putting out their candles one by one as he passed along the

streets ; but the lively strains that proceeded from the central edifice revealed distinctly enough what was going on among the temporary visitors from the neighbouring manors. The doors were opened for him, and entering the vestibule lined with flags, flowers, evergreens, and escutcheons, he stood looking into the furnace of gaiety beyond.

It was some time before he could gather his impressions of the scene, so perplexing were the lights, the motions, the toilets, the full-dress uniforms of officers and the harmonies of sound. Yet light, sound, and movement were not so much the essence of that giddy scene as an intense aim at obliviousness in the beings composing it. For two or three hours at least those whirling young people meant not to know that they were mortal. The room was beating like a heart, and the pulse was regulated by the trembling strings of the most popular quadrille band in Wessex. But at last his eyes grew settled enough to look critically around.

The room was crowded—too crowded.

Every variety of fair one, beauties primary, secondary, and tertiary, appeared among the personages composing the throng. There were suns and moons; also pale planets of little account. Broadly speaking, these daughters of the county fell into two classes: one the pink-faced unsophisticated girls from neighbouring rectories and small country-houses, who knew not town except for an occasional fortnight, and who spent their time from Easter to Lammas Day much as they spent it during the remaining nine months of the year: the other class were the children of the wealthy landowners, who migrated each season to the town-house; these were pale and collected, showed less enjoyment in their countenances, and wore in general an approximation to the languid manners of the capital.

A quadrille was in progress, and Somerset scanned each set. His mind had run so long upon the necklace, that his glance involuntarily sought out that gleaming object rather than the personality of its wearer. At the top of the room there he beheld it;

but it was on the neck of Charlotte De Stancy.

The whole lucid explanation broke across his understanding in a second. His dear Paula had fetched the necklace that Charlotte should not appear to disadvantage among the county people by reason of her poverty. It was generously done—a disinterested act of sisterly kindness; theirs was the friendship of Hermia and Helena. Before he had got further than to realise this, there wheeled round amongst the dancers a lady whose *tournure* he recognised well. She was Paula; and to the young man's vision a superlative something distinguished her from all the rest. This was not dress or ornament, for she had hardly a gem upon her, her attire being a model of effective simplicity. Her partner was Captain De Stancy.

The discovery of this latter fact slightly obscured his appreciation of what he had discovered just before. It was with rather a lowering brow that he asked himself whether Paula's *prédilection d'artiste*, as she called it,

for the De Stancy line might not lead to a *prédilection* of a different sort for its last representative which would be not at all satisfactory.

The architect remained in the background till the dance drew to a conclusion, and then he went forward. The circumstance of having met him by accident once already that day seemed to quench any surprise in Miss Power's bosom at seeing him now. There was nothing in her parting from Captain De Stancy, when he led her to a seat, calculated to make Somerset uneasy after his long absence. Though, for that matter, this proved nothing; for, like all wise maidens, Paula never ventured on the game of the eyes with a lover in public; well knowing that every moment of such indulgence overnight might mean an hour's sneer at her expense by the indulged gentleman next day, when weighing womankind by the aid of a cold morning light and a bad headache.

Whilst Somerset was explaining to Paula and her aunt the reason of his sudden ap-

pearance, their attention was drawn to a seat a short way off by a fluttering of ladies round the spot. In a moment it was whispered that somebody had fallen ill, and in another that the sufferer was Miss De Stancy. Paula, Mrs. Goodman, and Somerset at once joined the group of friends who were assisting her. Neither of them imagined for an instant that the unexpected advent of Somerset on the scene had anything to do with the poor girl's indisposition.

She was assisted out of the room, and her brother who now came up prepared to take her home, Somerset exchanging a few civil words with him, which the hurry of the moment prevented them from continuing; though on taking his leave with Charlotte, who was now better, De Stancy informed Somerset in answer to a cursory inquiry that he hoped to be back again at the ball in half an hour.

When they were gone Somerset, feeling that now another dog might have his day, sounded Paula on the delightful question of a dance.

Paula replied in the negative.

"How is that?" asked Somerset with reproachful disappointment.

"I cannot dance again," she said in a somewhat depressed tone; "I must be released from every engagement to do so, on account of Charlotte's illness. I should have gone home with her if I had not been particularly requested to stay a little longer, since it is as yet so early, and Charlotte's illness is not very serious."

If Charlotte's illness was not very serious, Somerset thought, Paula might have stretched a point; but not wishing to hinder her in showing respect to a friend so well liked by himself, he did not ask it. De Stancy had promised to be back again in half an hour, and Paula had heard the promise. But at the end of twenty minutes, still seeming indifferent to what was going on around her, she said she would stay no longer, and reminding Somerset that they were soon to meet and talk over the rebuilding, drove off with her aunt to Stancy Castle.

Somerset stood looking at the retreating

carriage till it was enveloped in shades that the lamps could not disperse. The ball-room was now virtually empty for him, and feeling no great anxiety to return thither he stood on the steps for some minutes longer, looking into the calm mild night, and at the dark houses behind whose blinds lay the burghers with their eyes sealed up in sleep. He could not but think that it was rather too bad of Paula to spoil his evening for a sentimental devotion to Charlotte which could do the latter no appreciable good; and he would have felt seriously hurt at her move if it had not been equally severe upon Captain De Stancy, who was doubtless hastening back, full of a belief that she would still be found there.

The star of gas-jets over the entrance threw its light upon the walls on the opposite side of the street, where there were notice-boards of forthcoming events. In glancing over these for the fifth time, his eye was attracted by the first words of a placard in blue letters, of a size larger than the rest, and moving onward a few steps he read:—

DE STANCY.

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STANCY CASTLE.

By the kind permission of Miss Power,

A PLAY

Will shortly be performed at the above CASTLE,

IN AID OF THE FUNDS OF THE

COUNTY HOSPITAL,

By the Officers of the

ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY,

MARKTON BARRACKS,

ASSISTED BY SEVERAL

LADIES OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD.

The cast and other particulars will be duly announced in small bills. Places will be reserved on application to Mr. Clangham, High Street, Markton, where a plan of the room may be seen.

N.B.—The Castle is about fifteen minutes' drive from Markton Station, to which there are numerous convenient trains from all parts of the county.

In a profound study Somerset turned and re-entered the ball-room, where he remained gloomily standing here and there for about five minutes, at the end of which he observed

Captain De Stancy, who had returned punctually to his word, crossing the hall in his direction.

The gallant officer darted glances of lively search over every group of dancers and sitters ; and then with rather a blank look in his face he came on to Somerset. Replying to the latter's inquiry for his sister that she had nearly recovered, he said, " I don't see my father's neighbours anywhere."

" They have gone home," replied Somerset, a trifle dryly. " They asked me to make their apologies to you for leading you to expect they would remain. Miss Power was too anxious about Miss De Stancy to care to stay longer."

The eyes of De Stancy and the speaker met for an instant. That curious guarded understanding, or inimical confederacy, which arises at moments between two men in love with the same woman, was present here ; and in their mutual glances each said as plainly as by words that her departure had ruined his evening's hope.

They were now about as much in one

mood as it was possible for two such differing natures to be. Neither cared further for elaborating giddy curves on that town-hall floor. They stood talking languidly about this and that local topic, till De Stancy turned aside for a short time to speak to a dapper little lady who had beckoned to him. In a few minutes he came back to Somerset.

"Mrs. Camperton, the wife of Major Camperton of my battery, would very much like me to introduce you to her. She is an old friend of your father's, and has wanted to know you for a long time."

De Stancy and Somerset crossed over to the lady, and in a few minutes, thanks to her flow of spirits, she and Somerset were chatting with remarkable freedom.

"It is a happy coincidence," continued Mrs. Camperton, "that I should have met you here, immediately after receiving a letter from your father: indeed it reached me only this morning. He has been so kind! We are getting up some theatricals, as you know, I suppose, to help the funds of the County Hospital, which is in debt."

"I have just seen the announcement—nothing more."

"Yes, such an estimable purpose ; and as we wished to do it thoroughly well, I asked Mr. Somerset to design us the costumes, and he has now sent me the sketches. It is quite a secret at present, but we are going to play Shakespeare's romantic drama, 'Love's Labour's Lost,' and we hope to get Miss Power to take the leading part. You see, being such a handsome girl, and so wealthy, and rather an undiscovered novelty in the county as yet, she would draw a crowded room, and greatly benefit the funds."

"Miss Power going to play herself?—I am rather surprised," said Somerset. "Whose idea is all this?"

"Oh, Captain De Stancy's—he's the originator entirely. You see he is so interested in the neighbourhood, his family having been connected with it for so many centuries, that naturally a charitable object of this local nature appeals to his feelings."

"Naturally!" her listener laconically repeated. "And have you settled who is to

play the junior gentleman's part, leading lover, hero, or whatever he is called ? ”

“ Not absolutely ; though I think Captain De Stancy will not refuse it ; and he is a very good figure. At present it lies between him and Mr. Mild, one of our young lieutenants. My husband, of course, takes the heavy line ; and I am to be the second lady, though I am rather too old for the part really. If we can only secure Miss Power for heroine the cast will be excellent.”

“ Excellent ! ” said Somerset, with a spectral smile.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN he awoke the next morning at the King's Arms Hotel, Somerset felt quite morbid on recalling the intelligence he had received from Mrs. Camperton. But as the day for serious practical consultation about the castle works, to which Paula had playfully alluded, was now close at hand, he determined to banish sentimental reflections on the frailties that were besieging her nature, by active preparation for his professional undertaking. To be her high-priest in art, to elaborate a structure whose cunning workmanship would be meeting her eye every day till the end of her natural life, and saying to her, "He invented it," with all the eloquence of an inanimate thing long

regarded—this was no mean satisfaction, come what else would.

He returned to town the next day to set matters there in such trim that no inconvenience should result from his prolonged absences at the castle ; for having no other commission he determined (with an eye rather to heart-interests than to increasing his professional practice) to make, as before, the castle itself his office, studio, and chief abiding place till the works were fairly in progress.

On the tenth he reappeared at Markton. Passing through the town, on the road to Stancy Castle, his eyes were again arrested by the notice-board which had conveyed such startling information to him on the night of the ball. The small bills now appeared thereon ; but when he anxiously looked them over to learn how the parts were to be allotted, he found that intelligence still withheld. Yet they told enough ; the list of lady-players was given, and Miss Power's name was one.

That a young lady who, six months ago,

would scarcely join for conscientious reasons in a simple dance on her own lawn, should now be willing to exhibit herself on a public stage, simulating love-passages with a stranger, argued a rate of development which under any circumstances would have surprised him, but which, with the particular addition, as leading colleague, of Captain De Stancy, inflamed him almost to anger. What clandestine arrangements had been going on in his absence to produce such a full-blown intention it were futile to guess. Paula's course was a race rather than a march, and each successive heat was startling in its eclipse of that which went before.

Somerset was, however, introspective enough to know that his morals would have taken no such virtuous alarm had he been the chief male player instead of Captain De Stancy.

He passed under the castle-arch and entered. There seemed a little turn in the tide of affairs when it was announced to him that Miss Power expected him, and was alone.

The well-known ante-chambers through which he walked, filled with twilight, draughts, and thin echoes that seemed to reverberate from two hundred years ago, did not delay his eye as they had done when he had been ignorant that his destiny lay beyond ; and he followed on through all this ancientness to where the modern Paula sat to receive him.

He forgot everything in the pleasure of being alone in a room with her. She met his eye with that in her own which cheered him. It was a light expressing that something was understood between them. She said quietly in two or three words that she had expected him in the forenoon.

Somerset explained that he had come only that morning from London.

After a little more talk, in which she said that her aunt would join them in a few minutes, and that Miss De Stancy was still indisposed at her father's house, she rang for tea and sat down beside a little table. "Shall we proceed to business at once?" she asked him.

" I suppose so."

" First then, when will the working drawings be ready, which I think you said must be made out before the work could begin ? "

While Somerset informed her on this and other matters, Mrs. Goodman entered and joined in the discussion, after which they found it would be necessary to adjourn to the studio where the plans were hanging. On their walk thither Paula asked if he stayed late at the ball.

" I left soon after you."

" That was very early, seeing how late you arrived."

" Yes. . . . I did not dance."

" What did you do, then ? "

" I moped, and walked to the door ; and saw an announcement."

" I know—the play that is to be performed."

" In which you are to be the Princess."

" That's not settled.—I have not agreed yet. I shall not play the Princess of France unless Mr. Mild plays the King of Navarre."

This sounded rather well. The Princess

was the lady beloved by the King ; and Mr. Mild the young lieutenant of artillery was a diffident, inexperienced, rather plain-looking fellow, whose sole interest in theatricals lay in the consideration of his costume and the sound of his own voice in the ears of the audience. With such an unobjectionable person to enact the part of lover, the prominent character of leading young lady or heroine, which Paula was to personate, was really the most satisfactory in the whole list for her. For although she was to be wooed hard, there was just as much love-making among the remaining personages ; while, as Somerset had understood the play, there could occur no flings of her person upon her lover's neck, or agonised downfalls upon the stage, in her whole performance, as there were in the parts chosen by Mrs. Camperton, the major's wife, and some of the other ladies.

"Why do you play at all !" he murmured.

"What a question ! How could I refuse for such an excellent purpose ? They say that my taking a part will be worth a hundred pounds to the charity. My father

always supported the hospital, which is quite undenominational; and he said I was to do the same."

"Do you think the peculiar means you have adopted for supporting it entered into his view?" inquired Somerset, regarding her with critical dryness. "For my part I don't."

"It is an interesting way," she returned persuasively, though apparently in a state of mental equipoise on the point raised by his question. "And I shall not play the Princess, as I said, to any other than that quiet young man. Now I assure you of this, so don't be angry and absurd! Besides, the King doesn't marry me at the end of the play, as in Shakespeare's other comedies. And if Miss De Stancy continues seriously unwell I shall not play at all."

The young man pressed her hand, but she gently slipped it away.

"Are we not engaged, Paula?" he asked.

She evasively shook her head.

"Come—yes we are! Shall we tell your aunt?" he continued. Unluckily at that

moment Mrs. Goodman, who had followed them to the studio at a slower pace, appeared round the doorway.

“No,—to the last,” replied Paula hastily. Then her aunt entered, and the conversation was no longer personal.

Somerset took his departure in a serener mood, though not completely assured.

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS serenity continued during two or three following days, when, continuing at the castle, he got pleasant glimpses of Paula now and then. Her strong desire that his love for her should be kept secret, perplexed him ; but his affection was generous, and he acquiesced in that desire.

Meanwhile news of the forthcoming dramatic performance radiated in every direction. And in the next number of the county paper it was announced, to Somerset's comparative satisfaction, that the cast was definitively settled, Mr. Mild having agreed to be the King and Miss Power the French Princess. Captain De Stancy, with becoming modesty for one who was the leading spirit, figured

quite low down, in the secondary character of Sir Nathaniel.

Somerset remembered that, by a happy chance, the costume he had designed for Sir Nathaniel was not at all picturesque ; moreover Sir Nathaniel scarcely came near the Princess through the whole play.

Every day after this there was coming and going to and from the castle of railway vans laden with canvas columns, pasteboard trees, limp house-fronts, woollen lawns, and lath balustrades. There were also frequent arrivals of young ladies from neighbouring country houses, and warriors from the X and Y batteries of artillery, distinguishable by their regulation shaving.

But it was upon Captain De Stancy and Mrs. Camperton that the weight of preparation fell. Somerset, through being much occupied in the drawing-office, was seldom present during the consultations and rehearsals ; until one day, tea being served in the drawing-room at the usual hour, he dropped in with the rest to receive a cup from Paula's table. The chatter was tremendous, and Somerset

was at once consulted about some necessary carpentry which was to be specially made at Markton. After that he was looked on as one of the band, which resulted in a large addition to the number of his acquaintance in this part of England.

But his own feeling was that of being an outsider still. This vagary had been originated, the play chosen, the parts allotted, all in his absence, and calling him in at the last moment might, if flirtation were possible in Paula, be but a sop to pacify him. What would he have given to impersonate her lover in the piece! But neither Paula nor any one else had asked him.

The eventful evening came. Somerset had been engaged during the day with the different people by whom the works were to be carried out; and in the evening went to his rooms at the King's Arms, Markton, where he dined. He did not return to the castle till the hour fixed for the performance, and having been received by Mrs. Goodman entered the large apartment, now transfigured into a theatre, like any other spectator.

Rumours of the projected representation had spread far and wide. Six times the number of tickets issued might have been readily sold. Friends and acquaintances of the actors came from curiosity to see how they would acquit themselves; while other classes of people came because they were eager to see well-known notabilities in unwonted situations. When ladies, hitherto only beheld in frigid, impenetrable positions behind their coachmen in Markton High Street, were about to reveal their hidden traits, home attitudes, intimate smiles, nods, and perhaps kisses, to the public eye, it was a throwing open of fascinating social secrets not to be missed for money.

The performance opened with no further delay than was occasioned by the customary refusal of the curtain at these times to rise more than two feet six inches; but this hitch was remedied, and the play began. It was with no enviable emotion that Somerset, who was watching intently, saw, not Mr. Mild, but Captain De Stancy, enter as the King of Navarre.

Somerset as a friend of the family had had a seat reserved for him next to that of Mrs. Goodman, and turning to her he said with some excitement, "I understood that Mr. Mild had agreed to take that part?"

"Yes," she said in a whisper, "so he had; but he broke down. He did very well at the first rehearsal; then he got more and more nervous, and at last this very morning said he could not possibly enact the part. Luckily Captain De Stancy was familiar with it, through having coached the others so persistently, and he undertook it off-hand. Being about the same figure as Lieutenant Mild the same dress fits him, with a little alteration by the tailor."

It did fit him indeed; and of the male costumes it was that on which Somerset had bestowed most pains when designing them. It shrewdly burst upon his mind that there might have been collusion between Mild and De Stancy, the former agreeing to take the captain's place and act as blind till the last moment. A greater question was, could Paula have possibly been aware of this, and

would she perform as the Princess of France now De Stancy was to be her lover, or throw up the part and stop the play ?

“ Does Miss Power know of this change ? ” he inquired.

“ She did not till quite a short time ago.”

He asked no further question from very pride, and controlled his impatience till the beginning of the second act. The Princess entered ; it was Paula. But whether the slight embarrassment with which she pronounced her opening words,

Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean,
Needs not the painted flourish of your praise,

was due to the newness of her situation, or to her knowledge that De Stancy had usurped Mild's part of her lover, he could not guess. De Stancy appeared, and Somerset felt grim as he listened to the gallant Captain's salutation of the Princess, and her response.

De S.—Fair Princess, welcome to the court of Navarre.

Paula.—Fair, I give you back again : and welcome, I have not yet.

Somerset listened to this and to all that

which followed of the same sort, with the reflection that, after all, the Princess never throughout the piece compromised her dignity by showing her love for the King; and that the latter, on this account, never addressed her in words in which passion got the better of courtesy. Moreover, as Paula had herself observed, they did not marry at the end of the piece, as in Shakespeare's other comedies. Somewhat calm in this assurance, he waited on while the other couples respectively indulged in their love-making and banter, including Mrs. Camperton as the sprightly Rosaline. But he was doomed to be surprised out of his humour when the end of the act came on. In abridging the play for convenience of representation, the favours or gifts from the gentlemen to the ladies were personally presented; and now Somerset saw De Stancy advance with the necklace fetched by Paula from London, and clasp it on her neck.

This seemed to throw a less pleasant light on her hasty journey. To fetch a valuable ornament in order to lend it to a poorer

friend was estimable ; but to fetch it that the friend's brother should have something magnificent and attractive to use as a lover's offering to herself in public, that wore a different complexion. Moreover, if the article were recognised by the spectators as the same that Charlotte had worn at the ball, which it probably was, the presentation by De Stancy of what must seem to be an heirloom of his house assumed the colour of symbolising a union of the families.

De Stancy's mode of presenting the necklace, though unauthorised by Shakespeare, had the full approval of the company, and set them in good humour to receive Major Camperton as Armado the braggart. Nothing calculated to stimulate jealousy occurred again till the fifth act ; and then there arose full cause for it.

The scene was the outside of the Princess's pavilion. De Stancy, as the King of Navarre, stood with his group of attendants awaiting the Princess, who presently entered from her door. The two began to converse

Rebuke me not for that which you provoke ;
The virtue of your eye must break my oath.

If I profane with my unworthy hand

This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this—

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

Somerset stared. Surely in this comedy the King never addressed the Princess in such warm words ; and yet they were Shakespeare's, for they were quite familiar to him. A dim suspicion crossed his mind. Mrs. Goodman had brought a copy of Shakespeare with her, which she kept in her lap and never looked at : borrowing it, Somerset turned to "Romeo and Juliet," and there he saw the words which De Stancy had introduced as gag, to intensify the mild love-making of the

other play. Meanwhile De Stancy continued:

Oh then, dear Saint, let lips do what hands do ;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purg'd !

Could it be that De Stancy was going to do what came next in the stage direction—kiss her? Before there was time for conjecture on that point the sound of a very sweet and long-drawn osculation spread through the room, followed by loud applause from the people in the cheap seats. De Stancy withdrew from bending over Paula, and she was very red in the face. Nothing seemed clearer than that he had actually done the deed. The applause continuing, Somerset turned his head. Five hundred faces had regarded the act; and four hundred and fifty mouths in those faces were smiling. About one half of them were tender smiles; these came from the women. The other half were at best humorous, and mainly satirical; these came from the men. It was

a profanation without parallel, and his face blazed like a coal.

The play was now nearly at an end, and Somerset sat on, feeling what he did not and could not express. More than ever was he assured that there had been collusion between the two artillery officers to bring about this end. That he should have been the unhappy man to design those picturesque dresses in which his rival so audaciously played the lover to his, Somerset's, mistress, was an added point to the satire. He could hardly go so far as to assume that Paula was a consenting party to this startling interlude; but her otherwise unaccountable wish that his own love should be clandestinely shown lent immense force to a doubt of her sincerity. The ghastly thought that she had merely been keeping him on, like a pet spaniel, to amuse her leisure moments till she should have found appropriate opportunity for an open engagement with some one else, trusting to his sense of chivalry to keep secret their little episode, filled him with a grim heat.

CHAPTER IX.

AT the back of the room the applause had been loud at the moment of the kiss, real or counterfeit. The cause was partly owing to an exceptional circumstance which had occurred in that quarter early in the play.

The people had all seated themselves, and the first act had begun, when the tapestry that screened the door was lifted gently and a figure appeared in the opening. The general attention was at this moment absorbed by the newly disclosed stage, and scarcely a soul noticed the stranger. Had any one of the audience turned his head, there would have been sufficient in the countenance to detain his gaze, notwithstanding the counter-attraction forward.

He was obviously a man who had come

from afar. There was not a square inch about him that had anything to do with modern English life. His visage, which was of the colour of light porphyry, had little of its original surface left; it was a face which had been the plaything of strange fires or pestilences, that had moulded to whatever shape they chose his originally supple skin, and left it pitted, puckered, and seamed like a dried water-course. But though dire catastrophes or the treacherous airs of remote climates had done their worst upon his exterior, they seemed to have affected him but little within, to judge from a certain robustness which showed itself in his manner of standing.

The face-marks had a meaning, for any one who could read them, beyond the mere suggestion of their origin: they signified that this man had either been the victim of some terrible necessity as regarded the occupation to which he had devoted himself, or that he was a man of dogged obstinacy, from sheer *sang froid* holding his ground amid malignant forces when others would have fled affrighted away.

As nobody noticed him, he dropped the door-hangings after a while, walked silently along the matted alley, and sat down in one of the back chairs. His manner of entry was enough to show that the strength of character which he seemed to possess had phlegm for its base and not ardour. One might have said that perhaps the shocks he had passed through had taken all his original warmth out of him. His beaver hat, which he had retained on his head till this moment, he now placed under the seat, where he sat absolutely motionless till the end of the first act, as if he were indulging in a monologue which did not quite reach his lips.

When Paula entered at the beginning of the second act he showed as much excitement as was expressed by a slight movement of the eyes. When she spoke he turned to his next neighbour, and asked him in cold level words which had once been English, but which seemed to have lost the accent of nationality: "Is that the young woman who is the possessor of this castle—Power by name?"

His neighbour happened to be the landlord at Sleeping-Green, and he informed the stranger that she was what he supposed.

"And who is that gentleman whose line of business seems to be to make love to Power?"

"He's Captain De Stancy, Sir William De Stancy's son, who used to own this property."

"Baronet or knight?"

"Baronet—a very old-established family about here."

The stranger nodded, and the play went on, no further word being spoken till the fourth act was reached, when the stranger again said, without taking his narrow black eyes from the stage: "There's something in that love-making between Stancy and Power that's not all sham!"

"Well," said the landlord, "I have heard different stories about that, and wouldn't be the man to say what I couldn't swear to. The story is that Captain De Stancy, who is as poor as a gallicrow, is in full cry after her, and that his only chance lies in his being heir

to a title and the old name. But she has not shown a genuine hanker for anybody yet."

"If she finds the money, and this Stancy finds the name and blood, 'twould be a very neat match between 'em,—hey?"

"That's the argument."

Nothing more was said again for a long time, but the stranger's eyes showed more interest in the passes between Paula and De Stancy than they had shown before. At length the crisis came, as described in the last chapter, De Stancy saluting her with that semblance of a kiss which gave such umbrage to Somerset. The stranger's thin lips lengthened a couple of inches with satisfaction; he put his hand into his pocket, drew out two half-crowns which he handed to the landlord, saying, "Just applaud that, will you, and get your comrades to do the same."

The landlord, though a little surprised, took the money, and began to clap his hands as desired. The example was contagious, and spread all over the room; for the audience, gentle and simple, though they might

not have followed the blank verse in all its bearings, could at least appreciate a kiss. It was the unusual acclamation raised by this means which had led Somerset to turn his head.

When the play had ended the stranger was the first to rise, and going downstairs at the head of the crowd he passed out of the door, and was lost to view. Some questions were asked by the landlord as to the stranger's individuality ; but few had seen him ; fewer had noticed him, singular as he was ; and none knew his name.

While these things had been going on in the quarter allotted to the commonalty, Somerset in front had waited the fall of the curtain with those sick and sorry feelings which should be combated by the aid of philosophy and a good conscience, but which really are only subdued by time and the abrading rush of affairs. He was, however, stoical enough, on the fall of the curtain, to accept Mrs. Goodman's invitation to accompany her to the drawing-room, fully expecting to find there a large company, including Captain De Stancy.

But none of the acting ladies and gentlemen had emerged from their dressing-rooms as yet. Feeling that he did not care to meet any of them that night, he bade farewell to Mrs. Goodman after a few minutes of conversation, and left her. While he was passing along the corridor, at the side of the gallery which had been used as the theatre, Paula crossed it from the latter apartment towards an opposite door. She was still in the dress of the Princess, and the diamond and pearl necklace still hung over her bosom as placed there by Captain De Stancy.

Her eye caught Somerset's, and she stopped. Probably there was something in his face which told his mind, for she invited him by a smile into the room she was entering.

"I congratulate you on your performance," he said mechanically, when she pushed to the door.

"Do you really think it was well done?" she asked, drawing near him with a sociable air.

"It was startlingly done—the part from 'Romeo and Juliet' pre-eminently so."

"Do you think I knew he was going to introduce it, or do you think I didn't know?" she said, with that gentle sauciness which shows itself in the loved one's manner when she has had a triumphant evening without the lover's assistance.

"I think you may have known."

"No," she averred, decisively shaking her head. "It took me as much by surprise as it probably did you. But why should I have told!"

Without answering that question Somerset went on. "Then what he did at the end of his gag was of course a surprise also."

"He didn't really do what he seemed to do," she serenely answered.

"Well, I have no right to make observations—your actions are not subject to my surveillance; you float above my plane," said the young man with some bitterness. "But to speak plainly, surely he—kissed you?"

"No," she said. "He only kissed the air in front of me—ever so far off."

"Was it six inches off?"

"No, not six inches."

"Nor three."

"It was quite one," she said, with an ingenuous air.

"I don't call that very far."

"A miss is as good as a mile, says the time-honoured proverb; and it is not for us modern mortals to question its truth."

"How can you be so off-hand!" broke out Somerset. "I love you wildly and desperately, Paula, and you know it well!"

"I have never denied knowing it," she said softly.

"Then why do you, with such knowledge, adopt an air of levity at such a moment as this! You keep me at arm's-length, and won't say whether you care for me one bit, or no. I have owned all to you; yet never once have you owned anything to me!"

"I have owned much. And you do me wrong if you consider that I show levity. But even if I have not owned everything, and you all, it is not altogether such a grievous thing."

"You mean to say that it is not grievous, even if a man does love a woman, and suffers

all the pain of feeling he loves in vain? Well, I say it is quite the reverse, and I have grounds for knowing."

"Now, don't fume so, George Somerset, but hear me. My not owning all may not have the dreadful meaning you think, and therefore it may not be really such a grievous thing. There are genuine reasons for women's conduct in these matters as well as for men's, though it is sometimes supposed to be regulated entirely by caprice. And if I do not give way to every feeling—I mean demonstration—it is because I don't want to. There, now, don't expect me to say more."

"Very well," said Somerset, with repressed sadness, "I will not expect you to say more. But you do like me a little, Paula?"

"Now!" she said, shaking her head with symptoms of tenderness and looking into his eyes. "What have you just promised? Perhaps I like you a little more than a little, which is much too much! Yes,—Shakespeare says so, and he is always right. Do you still doubt me? Ah, I see you do!"

"Because somebody has stood nearer to you to-night than I."

"An elderly man like him!—half as old again as either of us! How can you mind him? What shall I do to show you that I do not for a moment let him come between me and you?"

"It is not for me to suggest what you should do. Though what you should permit *me* to do is obvious enough."

She dropped her voice: "You mean, permit you to do really and in earnest what he only seemed to do in the play."

Somerset signified by a look that such had been his thought.

Paula was silent. "No," she murmured at last. "That cannot be. He did not, nor must you."

It was said none the less decidedly for being spoken low.

"You quite resent such a suggestion: you have a right to. I beg your pardon, not for speaking of it, but for thinking it."

"I don't resent it at all, and I am not offended one bit. But I am not the less of

opinion that it is possible to be premature in some things; and to do this just now would be premature. I know what you would say—that you would not have asked it, but for that unfortunate improvisation of it in the play. But that I was not responsible for, and therefore owe no reparation to you now. . . . Listen!”

“Paula—Paula! Where in the world are you?” was heard resounding along the corridor in the voice of her aunt. “Our friends are all ready to leave, and you will surely bid them good-night!”

“I must be gone—I won’t ring for you to be shown out—come this way.”

“But how will you get on in repeating the play to-morrow evening if that interpolation is against your wish?” he asked, looking her hard in the face.

“I’ll think it over during the night. Come to-morrow morning to help me settle. But,” she added, with coy yet genial independence, “listen to me. Not a word more about a—what you asked for, mind. I don’t want to go so far, and I will not—not yet at least

—I mean not at all. You must promise that, or I cannot see you again alone.”

“It shall be as you request.”

“Very well. And not a word of this to a soul. My aunt suspects : but she is a good aunt and will say nothing. Now that is clearly understood, I should be glad to consult with you to-morrow early. I will come to you in the studio or Pleasance as soon as I am disengaged.”

She took him to a little chamfered doorway in the corner, which opened into a descending turret ; and Somerset went down. When he had unfastened the door at the bottom, and stepped into the lower corridor she asked, “Are you down ?” And on receiving an affirmative reply she closed the top door.

CHAPTER X.

SOMERSET was in the studio the next morning about ten o'clock, superintending the labours of Knowles, Bowles, and Cockton, whom he had again engaged to assist him with the drawings on his appointment to carry out the works. When he had set them going he ascended the staircase of the great tower for some purpose that bore upon the forthcoming repairs of this part. Passing the door of the telegraph-room he heard little sounds within which led him to pause. They came from the instrument, that somebody was working. Only two people in the castle, to the best of his knowledge, knew the trick of this; Miss Power, and a page in her service, called John. Miss De Stancy could

also despatch messages, but she was at Myrtle Villa.

The door was closed, and much as he would have liked to enter, the possibility that Paula was not the performer led him to withhold his steps, since he had no legitimate reason for intruding. He went on to where the uppermost masonry had resisted the mighty hostility of the elements for five hundred years without receiving worse dilapidation than half a century produces upon the face of man. But he still wondered who was telegraphing, and whether the message bore on the subject of housekeeping, architecture, theatricals, or love.

Could Somerset have seen through the panels of the door in passing, he would have beheld the room occupied by Paula alone.

It was she who sat at the instrument, and the message she was despatching ran as under:—

"Can you send down a competent actress, who will undertake the part of Princess of France in 'Love's Labour's Lost' this evening in a temporary theatre here? Dresses already

provided suitable to a lady about the middle height. State price."

The telegram was addressed to a well-known theatrical agent in London.

Off went the message, and Paula retired into the next room, which was her boudoir, leaving the door open between that and the one she had just quitted. Here she busied herself with writing some letters, till in less than an hour the telegraph instrument showed signs of life, and she hastened back to its side. The reply received from the agent was as follows :—

"Miss Barbara Bell of the Regent's Theatre could come. Quite competent. Her terms would be about twenty-five guineas."

Without a moment's pause Paula returned for answer :—

"The terms are quite satisfactory."

Presently she heard the instrument again, and emerging from the next room in which she had passed the intervening time as before, she read :—

"Miss Barbara Bell's terms were accidentally understated. They would be forty

guineas, in consequence of the distance. Am waiting at the office for a reply."

Paula set to work as before and replied :—

"Quite satisfactory; only let her come at once."

She did not leave the room this time, but went to an arrow-slit hard by and gazed out at the trees till the instrument began to speak again. Returning to it with a leisurely manner, implying a full persuasion that the matter was settled, she was somewhat surprised to learn that

"Miss Bell, in stating her terms, understands that she will not be required to leave London till the middle of the afternoon. If it is necessary for her to leave at once, ten guineas extra would be indispensable, on account of the great inconvenience of such a short notice."

Paula seemed a little vexed, but not much concerned she sent back with a readiness scarcely politic in the circumstances :—

"She must start at once. Price agreed to."

Her impatience for the answer was mixed with curiosity as to whether it was due to the

agent or to Miss Barbara Bell that the prices had grown like Jack's Bean-stalk in the negotiation. Another telegram duly came:—

"Travelling expenses are expected to be paid."

With decided impatience she dashed off:—

"Of course ; but nothing more will be agreed to."

Then, and only then, came the desired reply:—

"Miss Bell starts by the twelve o'clock train."

This business being finished, Paula left the chamber and descended into the inclosure called the Pleasance, a spot grassed down like a lawn. Here stood Somerset, who, having come down from the tower, was looking on while a man searched for old foundations under the sod with a crowbar. He was glad to see her at last, and noticed that she looked serene and relieved ; but could not for the moment divine the cause. Paula came nearer, returned his salutation, and regarded the man's operations in silence

awhile till his work led him to a distance from them.

"Do you still wish to consult me?" asked Somerset.

"About the building perhaps," said she.
"Not about the play."

"But you said so?"

"Yes; but it will be unnecessary."

Somerset thought this meant skittishness, and merely bowed.

"You mistake me as usual," she said, in a low tone. "I am not going to consult you on that matter, because I have done all you could have asked for without consulting you. I take no part in the play to-night."

"Forgive my momentary doubt!"

"Somebody else will play for me—an actress from London. But on no account must the substitution be known beforehand, or the performance to-night will never come off; and that I should much regret."

"Captain De Stancy will not play his part if he knows you will not play yours—that's what you mean?"

"You may assume as much," she said

smiling. "And to guard against this you must help me to keep the secret by being my confederate."

To be Paula's confederate; to-day, indeed, time had brought him something worth waiting for. "In anything!" cried Somerset.

"Only in this!" said she, with soft severity. "And you know what you have promised, George; and you remember there is to be no—what we talked about! Now will you go in the one-horse brougham to Markton Station this afternoon, and meet the four o'clock train? Inquire for a lady for Stancy Castle—a Miss Bell; see her safely into the carriage, and send her straight on here. I am particularly anxious that she should not enter the town, for I think she once came to Markton in a starring company, and she might be recognised, and my plan be thus defeated."

Thus she instructed her lover and devoted friend; and when he could stay no longer he left her in the garden to return to his studio. As Somerset went in by the garden door he met a strange-looking per-

sonage coming out by the same passage—a stranger, with the manner of a Dutchman, the face of a smelter, and the clothes of an inhabitant of Guiana. The stranger, whom we have already seen sitting at the back of the theatre the night before, looked hard from Somerset to Paula, and from Paula again to Somerset, as he stepped out. Somerset had an unpleasant conviction that this queer gentleman had been standing for some time in the doorway unnoticed, quizzing him and his mistress as they talked together. If so he might have learnt a secret.

When he arrived upstairs, Somerset went to a window commanding a view of the garden. Paula still stood in her place, and the stranger was earnestly conversing with her. Soon they passed round the corner and disappeared.

It was now time for him to see about starting for Markton, an intelligible zest for circumventing the ardent and coercive captain of artillery saving him from any unnecessary delay in the journey. He was at

the station ten minutes before the train was due; and when it drew up to the platform the first person to jump out was Captain De Stancy in sportsman's attire and with a gun in his hand. Somerset nodded, and De Stancy spoke, informing the architect that he had been ten miles down the line shooting water-fowl. "That's Miss Power's carriage, I think," he added.

"Yes," said Somerset, carelessly. "She expects a friend, I believe. We shall see you at the castle again to-night?"

De Stancy assured him that they would, and the two men parted, Captain De Stancy, when he had glanced to see that the carriage was empty, going on to where a porter stood with a couple of dogs.

Somerset now looked again to the train. While his back had been momentarily turned to converse with the captain, a lady of five-and-thirty had alighted from the identical compartment occupied by De Stancy. She made an inquiry about getting to Stancy Castle, upon which Somerset, who had not till now observed her, went forward, and

introducing himself assisted her to the carriage and saw her safely off.

De Stancy had by this time disappeared, and Somerset walked on to his rooms at the King's Arms, where he remained till he had dined, picturing the discomfiture of his alert rival when there should enter to him as Princess, not Paula Power, but Miss Bell of the Regent's Theatre, London. Thus the hour passed, till he found that if he meant to see the issue of the plot it was time to be off.

On arriving at the castle, Somerset entered by the public door from the hall as before, a natural delicacy leading him to feel that though he might be welcomed as an ally at the stage-door—in other words, the door from the corridor—it was advisable not to take too ready an advantage of a privilege which, in the existing secrecy of his understanding with Paula, might lead to an overthrow of her plans on that point.

Not intending to sit out the whole performance, Somerset contented himself with standing in a window recess near the proscenium, whence he could observe both the

stage and the front rows of spectators. He was quite uncertain whether Paula would appear among the audience to-night, and resolved to wait events. Just before the rise of the curtain the young lady in question entered and sat down. When the scenery was disclosed and the King of Navarre appeared, what was Somerset's surprise to find that, though the part was the part taken by De Stancy on the previous night, the voice was that of Mr. Mild; to him, at the appointed season, entered the Princess, namely, Miss Barbara Bell.

Before Somerset had recovered from his crestfallen sensation at De Stancy's elusiveness, that officer himself emerged in evening dress from behind a curtain forming a wing to the proscenium, and Somerset remarked that the minor part originally allotted to him was filled by the subaltern who had enacted it the night before. De Stancy glanced across, whether by accident or otherwise Somerset could not determine, and his glance seemed to say he quite recognised there had been a trial of wits between them, and that,

thanks to his chance meeting with Miss Bell in the train, his had proved the stronger.

The house being less crowded to-night there were one or two vacant chairs in the best part. De Stancy, advancing from where he had stood for a few moments, seated himself comfortably beside Miss Power.

On the other side of her he now perceived the same queer elderly foreigner (as he appeared) who had come to her in the garden that morning. Somerset was surprised to perceive also that Paula with very little hesitation introduced him and De Stancy to each other. A conversation ensued between the three, none the less animated for being carried on in a whisper, in which Paula seemed on strangely intimate terms with the stranger, and the stranger to show feelings of great friendship for De Stancy, considering that they must be new acquaintances.

The play proceeded, and Somerset still lingered in his corner. He could not help fancying that De Stancy's ingenious relinquishment of his part, and its obvious reason, was winning Paula's admiration. His con-

duct was homage carried to unscrupulous and inconvenient lengths, a sort of thing which a woman may chide, but which she can never resent. Who could do otherwise than talk kindly to a man, incline a little to him, and condone his fault, when the sole motive of so audacious an exercise of his wits was to escape acting with any other heroine than herself?

His conjectures were brought to a pause by the ending of the comedy, and the opportunity afforded him of joining the group in front. The mass of people were soon gone, and the knot of friends assembled around Paula were discussing the merits and faults of the two days' performance.

"My uncle, Mr. Abner Power," said Paula suddenly to Somerset, as he came near, presenting the stranger to the astonished young man. "I could not see you before the performance, as I should have liked to do. The return of my uncle is so extraordinary, that it ought to be told in a less hurried way than this. He has been supposed dead by all of us for nearly ten years—ever since the time we last heard from him."

"For which I am to blame," said Mr. Power, nodding to Paula's architect. "Yet not I, but accident and a sluggish temperament. There are times, Mr. Somerset, when the human creature feels no interest in his kind, and assumes that his kind feel no interest in him. The feeling is not active enough to make him fly from their presence; but sufficient to keep him silent if he happens to be away. I may not have described it precisely; but this I know, that after my long illness, and the fancied neglect of my letters——"

"For which my father was not to blame, since he did not receive them," said Paula.

"For which nobody was to blame—after that, I say, I wrote no more."

"You have much pleasure in returning at last, no doubt," said Somerset.

"Sir, as I remained away without particular pain, so I return without particular joy. I speak the truth, and no compliments. I may add that there is one exception to this absence of feeling from my heart, namely, that I do derive great satisfaction from seeing

how mightily this young woman has grown and prevailed."

This address, though delivered nominally to Somerset, was listened to by Paula, Mrs. Goodman, and De Stancy also. After uttering it, the speaker turned away, and continued his previous conversation with Captain De Stancy. From this time till the group parted he never again spoke directly to Somerset, paying him barely so much attention as he might have expected as Paula's architect, and certainly less than he might have supposed his due as her accepted lover.

The result of the appearance, as from the tomb, of this wintry man was that the evening ended in a frigid and formal way which gave little satisfaction to the sensitive Somerset, who was abstracted and constrained by reason of thoughts on how this resuscitation of the uncle would affect his relation with Paula. It was possibly also the thought of two at least of the others. There had, in truth, scarcely yet been time enough to adumbrate the possibilities opened up by this gentleman's return.

The only private word exchanged by Somerset with any one that night was with Mrs. Goodman, in whom he always recognised a friend to his cause, though the fluidity of her character rendered her but a feeble one at the best of times. She informed him that Mr. Power had no sort of legal control over Paula, or direction in her estates; but Somerset could not doubt that a near and only blood relation, even had he possessed but half the static force of character that made itself apparent in Mr. Power, might exercise considerable moral influence over the girl if he chose. And in view of Mr. Power's marked preference for De Stancy, Somerset had many misgivings as to its operating in a direction favourable to himself.

CHAPTER XI.

SOMERSET was deeply engaged with his draughtsmen and builders during the three following days, and scarcely entered the occupied wing of the castle.

At his suggestion Paula had agreed to have the works executed as such operations were carried out in old times, before the advent of contractors. Each trade required in the building was to be represented by a master-tradesman of that denomination, who should stand responsible for his own section of labour, and for no other, Somerset himself as chief technician working out his designs on the spot. By this means the thoroughness of the workmanship would be greatly increased in comparison with the modern arrangement, whereby a nominal builder, seldom present, who can certainly know no more than one

trade intimately and well, and who often does not know that, undertakes the whole.

But notwithstanding its manifest advantages to the proprietor, the plan added largely to the responsibilities of the architect, who, with his master-mason, master-carpenter, master-plumber, and what not, had scarcely a moment to call his own. Still, the method being upon the face of it the true one, Somerset liked it, and supervised with a will.

But though so deeply occupied as to be removed from immediate contact with the household, there seemed to float across the court to him from the inhabited wing an intimation that things were not as they had been before ; that an influence adverse to himself was at work behind the ashlaed face of inner wall which confronted him hard by. Perhaps this was because he never saw Paula at the windows, or heard her footfall in that half of the building given over to himself and his myrmidons. There was really no reason other than a sentimental one why he should see her. The uninhabited part of the castle was almost an independent structure,

and it was quite natural to exist for weeks in this wing without coming in contact with residents in the other.

But a more pronounced cause than vague surmise was destined to perturb him, and this in an unexpected manner. It happened one morning that, before leaving his chambers at the King's Arms, he glanced through a local paper while waiting for the pony-carriage to be brought round in which he often drove to the castle. The paper was two days old, but to his unutterable amazement he read therein a paragraph which ran as follows :—

“We are informed that a marriage is likely to be arranged between Captain De Stancy, of the Royal Horse Artillery, only surviving son of Sir William De Stancy, Baronet, and Paula, only daughter of the late John Power, Esq., M.P., of Stancy Castle.”

Somerset dropped the paper, and stared out of the window. Fortunately for his emotions, the horse and carriage were at this moment brought to the door, so that nothing hindered Somerset in driving off to the spot

at which he would be soonest likely to learn what truth or otherwise there was in the newspaper report. From the first he doubted it : and yet how should it have got there ? Such strange rumours, like paradoxical maxims, generally include a portion of truth, and what this portion was he found it impossible to guess. Five days had elapsed since he last spoke to Paula ; could anything have happened in that interval to lead the tantalising girl to smile encouragingly on De Stancy ?

Reaching the castle he entered his own quarters as usual, and after setting the draughtsmen to work walked up and down, pondering how he might best see her without making the disturbing paragraph the ground of his request for an interview ; for if it were absolutely a fabrication, such a reason would wound her pride in her own honour towards him, and if it were partly true, he would certainly do better in leaving her alone than in reproaching her. It would simply amount to a proof that Paula was an arrant coquette, the explanation of whose guarded conduct

towards himself lay in the fact that she wished not to commit herself in playing her game with him.

But all this, or any of it, was too ungenerous a thought to entertain for an instant. It reopened the whole problem of her bearing from the beginning, and was painful even when rejected as absurd.

In his meditation he stood still, closely scanning one of the jamb-stones of a doorless entrance, as if to discover where the old hinge-hook had entered the stonework. He heard a footstep behind him, and looking round saw Paula standing by. She held a newspaper in her hand. The spot was one quite hemmed in from observation, a fact of which she seemed to be quite aware.

"I have something to tell you," she said; "something important. But you are so occupied with that old stone that I am obliged to wait."

"It is not true, surely!" he said, looking at the paper.

"No, look here," she said, holding up the sheet. It was not what he had supposed,

but a new one—the local rival to that which had contained the announcement, and was still damp from the press. She pointed, and he read :

“ We are authorised to state that there is no foundation whatever for the assertion of our contemporary that a marriage is likely to be arranged between Captain De Stancy and Miss Power of Stancy Castle.”

Somerset pressed her hand, and spoke his feelings not by language, but by the more pathetic vehicle of eyes. “ It disturbed me,” he said, “ though I did not believe it.”

“ It astonished me, as much as it disturbed you ; and I sent this contradiction at once.”

“ How could it have got there ? ”

She shook her head.

“ You have not the least knowledge ? ”

“ Not the least. I wish I had.”

“ It was not from any friends of De Stancy’s ? or himself ? ”

“ It was not. His sister has ascertained beyond doubt that he knew nothing of it. Well, now, don’t say any more to me about the matter.”

"I'll find out how it got into the paper."

"Not now—any future time will do. I have something else to tell you."

"I hope the news is as good as the last," he said, looking into her face with anxiety; for though that face was blooming, it seemed full of a doubt as to how her next information would be taken.

"Oh yes; it is good, because everybody says so. We are going to take a delightful journey. My new-created uncle, as he seems, and I, and my aunt, and perhaps Charlotte, if she is well enough, are going to Nice, and other places about there."

"To Nice!" said Somerset, rather blankly. "And I must stay here!"

"Why, of course you must, considering what you have undertaken," she said, looking with saucy composure into his eyes. "My uncle's reason for proposing the journey just now is, that he thinks the alterations will make residence here dusty and disagreeable during the spring. The opportunity of going with him is too good a one for us to lose, as I have never been there."

"I wish I was going to be one of the party! . . . What do *you* wish about it?"

She shook her head impenetrably. "Who knows? Time will tell."

"Are you really glad you are going, dearest?—as I *must* call you just once," said the young man, gazing earnestly into her face, which struck him as looking far too rosy and radiant to be consistent with ever so little regret at leaving him behind.

"I take great interest in foreign trips, especially to the shores of the Mediterranean; and everybody makes a point of getting away when their house is turned out of the window."

"But you do feel a little sadness, such as I should feel if our positions were reversed?"

"I think you ought not to have asked that so incredulously," she murmured. "We can be near each other in spirit, when our bodies are far apart, can we not?" Her tone grew softer, and she drew a little closer to his side with a slightly nestling motion, as she went on, "May I be sure that you will not think

unkindly of me when I am absent from your sight, and not begrudge me any little pleasure because you are not there to share it with me?"

"May you! Can you ask it? . . . As for me, I shall have no pleasure to be begrudged or otherwise. The only pleasure I have is, as you well know, in you. When you are with me, I am happy: when you are away, I take no pleasure in anything."

"I don't deserve it. I have no right to disturb you so," she said, very gently. "But I have given you some pleasure, have I not? A little more pleasure than pain, perhaps."

"You have, and yet. . . . But I don't accuse you, dearest. Yes, you have given me pleasure. One truly pleasant time was when we stood together in the summer-house on the evening of the garden-party, and you said you liked me to love you."

"Yes, it was a pleasant time," she returned, thoughtfully. "How the rain came down, and formed a gauze between us and the dancers, did it not; and how afraid we were—at least I was—lest anybody should dis-

cover us there, and how quickly I ran in after the rain was over!"

"Yes," said Somerset, "I remember it. But no harm came of it to you. . . . And perhaps no good will come of it to me."

"Do not be premature in your conclusions, sir," she said, archly. "If you really do feel for me only half what you say, we shall—you will make good come of it—I mean in some way or other."

"Dear Paula,—now I believe you, and can bear anything."

"Then we will say no more ; because, as you recollect, we agreed not to go too far. No expostulations, for we are going to be practical young people ; besides, I won't listen if you utter them. I simply echo your words, and say I, too, believe you. Now I must go. Rely on me, and don't magnify trifles light as air."

"I *think* I understand you. And if I do, it will make a great difference in my conduct. You will have no cause to complain."

"Then you must not understand me so much as to make much difference ; for your

conduct as my architect is perfect. But I must not linger longer, though I wished you to know this news from my very own lips."

"Bless you for it! When do you leave?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"So early! Does your uncle guess anything? Do you wish him to be told just yet?"

"Yes, to the first; no, to the second."

"I may write to you?"

"On business, yes. It will be necessary."

"How can you speak so at a time of parting!"

"Now, George—you see I say George, and not Mr. Somerset, and you may draw your own inference—don't be so morbid in your reproaches! I have informed you that you may write, or still better, telegraph, since the wire is so handy—on business. Well, of course, it is for you to judge whether you will add postscripts of another sort. There, you make me say more than a woman ought, because you are so obtuse and literal. Good afternoon—good-bye! This will be my address."

She handed him a slip of paper, and was gone.

Though he saw her again after this, it was during the bustle of preparation, when there was always a third person present, usually in the shape of that breathing refrigerator, her uncle. Hence the few words that passed between them were of the most formal description, and chiefly concerned the restoration of the castle, and a church at Nice designed by him, which he wanted her to inspect.

They were to leave by an early afternoon train, and Somerset was invited to lunch on that day. The morning was occupied by a long business consultation in the studio with Mr. Power and Mrs. Goodman on what rooms were to be left locked up, what left in charge of the servants, and what thrown open to the builders and workmen under the surveillance of Somerset. At present the work consisted mostly of repairs to existing rooms, so as to render those habitable which had long been used only as stores for lumber. Paula did not appear during this discussion ;

The link formed by Charlotte between De Stancy and Paula, much as he liked the ingenuous girl, was one that he could have wished away. It constituted a bridge of access to Paula's inner life and feelings which nothing could rival; except that one fact which, as he firmly believed, did actually rival it, giving him faith and hope; his own primary occupation of Paula's heart. Moreover, Mrs. Goodman would be an influence favourable to himself and his cause during the journey; though, to be sure, to set against her there was the phlegmatic and obstinate Abner Power, in whom, apprized by those subtle media of intelligence which lovers possess, he fancied he saw no friend.

Somerset remained but a short time at the castle that day. The light of its chambers had fled, the gross grandeur of the dictatorial towers oppressed him, and the studio was hateful. He remembered a promise made long ago to Mr. Woodwell of calling upon him some afternoon; and a visit which had not much attractiveness in it at other times recommended itself now, through being the

one possible way open to him of hearing Paula named and her doings talked of, this being a turn the discussion would inevitably take. Hence in walking back to Markton, instead of going up the High Street, he turned aside into the unfrequented footway that led to the minister's cottage.

Mr. Woodwell was not indoors at the moment of his call, and Somerset lingered at the doorway, and cast his eyes around. It was a house which typified the drearier tenets of its occupier with great exactness. It stood upon its spot of earth without any natural union with it: no mosses disguised the stiff straight line where wall met earth; not a creeper softened the aspect of the bare front. The garden-walk was strewn with loose clinkers from the neighbouring foundry, which rolled under the pedestrian's foot and jolted his soul out of him before he reached the porchless door. But all was clean, and clear, and dry.

Whether Mr. Woodwell was personally responsible for this condition of things, or whether it resulted from a landlord's taste,

unchallenged by a preoccupied tenant, there was not time to closely consider, for at this minute Somerset perceived the minister coming up the walk towards him. Mr. Woodwell welcomed him heartily ; and yet with the mien of a man whose mind has scarcely dismissed some scene which has preceded the one that confronts him. What that scene was soon transpired.

“ I have had a busy afternoon,” said the minister, as they walked indoors ; “ or rather an exciting afternoon. Your client at Stancy Castle, whose relative, as I imagine you know, has so unexpectedly returned, has left with him to-day for the south of France ; and I wished to ask her before her departure some questions as to how a charity organised by her father was to be administered in her absence. But I have been very unfortunate. She could not find time to see me at her own house, and I awaited her at the station, all to no purpose, owing to the presence of her friends. Well, well, I must see if a letter will find her.”

Somerset asked if anybody of the neighbourhood was there to see them off.

"Yes, that was the trouble of it. Captain De Stancy was there, and quite monopolised her. I don't know what 'tis coming to, and perhaps I have no business to inquire, since she is scarcely a member of our church now. Who could have anticipated the daughter of my old friend John Power developing into the ordinary gay woman of the world as she has done? Who could have expected her to associate with people who show contempt for their Maker's intentions by flippantly assuming other characters than those in which He created them?"

"You mistake her," murmured Somerset, in a voice which he vainly endeavoured to attune to philosophy. "Miss Power has some very rare and beautiful qualities in her nature, though I confess I tremble—fear lest the De Stancy influence should be too strong."

"Sir, it is already! Do you remember my telling you that I thought the force of her surroundings would obscure the pure daylight of her spirit, as a monkish window of coloured images attenuates the rays of God's

sun? I do not wish to indulge in rash surmises, but her oscillation from her family creed of Calvinistic truth towards the traditions of the De Stancys has been so decided, though so gradual, that—well, I may be wrong.”

“That what?” said the young man sharply.

“I sometimes think she will take to her as husband the present representative of that impoverished line—Captain De Stancy—which she may easily do, if she chooses, as his behaviour to-day showed.”

“He was probably there on account of his sister,” said Somerset, trying to escape the mental picture of farewell gallantries bestowed on Paula.

“It was hinted at in the papers the other day.”

“And it was flatly contradicted.”

“Yes. Well, we shall know in the Lord’s good time: I can do no more for her. And now, Mr. Somerset, pray take a cup of tea.”

The discovery that De Stancy had enjoyed the coveted privilege of seeing the last of

her, coupled with the other words of the minister, depressed Somerset a little, and he did not stay long. As he went to the door Woodwell said, "There is a worthy man—the deacon of our chapel, Mr. Havill—who would like to be friendly with you. Poor man, since the death of his wife he seems to have something on his mind—some trouble which my words will not reach. If ever you are passing his door, please give him a look in. He fears that calling on you might be an intrusion."

Somerset did not clearly promise, and went his way. The minister's allusion to the mysterious announcement of the marriage reminded Somerset that she had expressed a wish to know how the paragraph came to be inserted. The wish had been but carelessly spoken; but so telling was the vacancy caused by her absence that any deed relating to her was attended with a sad satisfaction, and he went to the newspaper office to make inquiries on the point.

The reply was unexpected. The reporter informed his questioner that in returning

from the theatricals, at which he was present, he shared a fly homeward with a gentleman who assured him that such an alliance was certain, so obviously did it recommend itself to all concerned, as a means of strengthening both families. The gentleman's knowledge of the Powers was so precise that the reporter did not hesitate to accept his assertion. He was a man who had seen a great deal of the world, and his face was noticeable for the seams and scars on it.

Somerset recognised Paula's uncle in the portrait.

Hostilities, then, were beginning. The paragraph had been meant as the first slap. Taking her abroad was the second.

BOOK THE FOURTH.
SOMERSET, DARE AND DE STANCY.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was no part of Paula's journey in which Somerset did not think of her. He imagined her in the hotel at Havre, in her brief rest at Paris; her drive past the Place de la Bastille to the Boulevard Mazas to take the train for Lyons; her tedious progress through the dark of a winter night till she crossed the isothermal line which told of the beginning of a southern atmosphere, and onwards to the ancient blue sea.

Thus, between the hours devoted to architecture, he passed the next three days. One morning he set himself, by the help of John, to practise on the telegraph instrument, expecting a message. But though he watched the machine at every opportunity, or kept some other person on the alert in its neigh-

bourhood, no message arrived to gratify him till after the lapse of nearly a fortnight. Then she spoke from her new habitation nine hundred miles away, in these meagre words :

"Are settled at the address given. Can now attend to any inquiry about the building."

The pointed implication that she could attend to inquiries about nothing else, breathed of the veritable Paula so distinctly that he could forgive its sauciness. His reply was soon despatched :

"Will write particulars of our progress. Always the same." The last three words formed the sentimental appendage which she had assured him she could tolerate, and which he hoped she might desire.

He spent the remainder of the day in making a little sketch to show what had been done in the castle since her departure. This he despatched with a letter of explanation ending in a paragraph of a different tenor :

"I have demonstrated our progress as well as I could ; but another subject has been in my mind, even whilst writing the former.

Ask yourself if you use me well in keeping me a fortnight before you so much as say that you have arrived? The one thing that reconciled me to your departure was the thought that I should hear early from you: my idea of being able to submit to your absence was based entirely upon that.

“But I have resolved not to be out of humour, and to believe that your scheme of reserve is not unreasonable; neither do I quarrel with your injunction to keep silence to all relatives. I do not know anything I can say to show you more plainly my acquiescence in your wish ‘not to go too far’ (in short, to keep yourself dear—by dear I mean not cheap—you have been dear in the other sense a long time, as you know), than by not urging you to go a single degree further in warmth than you please.”

When this was posted he again turned his attention to her walls and towers, which indeed were a dumb consolation in many ways for the lack of herself. There was no nook in the castle to which he had not access

or could not easily obtain access by applying for the keys, and this propinquity of things belonging to her served to keep her image before him even more constantly than his memories would have done.

Three days and a half after the despatch of his subdued effusion the telegraph called to tell him the good news that

"Your letter and drawing are just received. Thanks for the latter. Will reply to the former by post this afternoon."

It was with cheerful patience that he attended to his three draughtsmen in the studio, or walked about the environs of the fortress during the fifty hours spent by her presumably tender missive on the road. A light fleece of snow fell during the second night of waiting, inverting the position of long-established lights and shades, and lowering to a dingy grey the approximately white walls of other weathers: he could trace the postman's footmarks as he entered over the bridge, knowing them by the dot of his walking-stick: on entering the expected letter was waiting upon his table. He looked at

its direction with glad curiosity ; it was the first letter he had ever received from her.

“ Hôtel —, Nice, Feb. 14.

“ MY DEAR MR. SOMERSET,” (the “George,” then, to which she had so kindly treated him in her last conversation, was not to be continued in black and white :)

“ Your letter explaining the progress of the work, aided by the sketch enclosed, gave me as clear an idea of the advance made since my departure as I could have gained by being present. I feel every confidence in you, and am quite sure the restoration is in good hands. In this opinion both my aunt and my uncle coincide. Please act entirely on your own judgment in everything, and as soon as you give a certificate to the builders for the first instalment of their money it will be promptly sent by my solicitors.

“ You bid me ask myself if I have used you well in not sending intelligence of myself till a fortnight after I had left you. Now, George, don’t be unreasonable ! Let me remind you that there are a thousand things

not bad in themselves, which, nevertheless, custom and circumstances render inexpedient to be done. I say this, not from pride in my own conduct, but to offer you a very fair explanation of it. Your resolve not to be out of humour with me suggests that you have been sorely tempted that way, else why should such a resolve have been necessary?

"If you only knew what passes in my mind, sometimes you would perhaps not be so ready to blame. Shall I tell you? No. For if it is a great emotion it may afford you a cruel satisfaction at finding I suffer through separation; and if it be a growing indifference to you, it will be inflicting gratuitous unhappiness upon you, if you care for me, as I *sometimes* think you may do a *little*."

("Oh, Paula!" said Somerset.)

"Please which way would you have it? But it is better that you should guess at what I feel than that you should distinctly know it. Notwithstanding this assertion you will, I know, adhere to your first prejudice in favour of prompt confessions. In spite of that, I fear that upon trial such promptness

would not produce that happiness which your fancy leads you to expect. Your heart would revolt in time, and when once that happens, farewell to the emotion you have told me of. Analyse your feelings strictly, and you will find this true. At the same time I admit that a woman who is *only* a compound of evasions, disguises, and caprices, is very disagreeable.

“Do not write *very* frequently, and never write at all unless you have some real information about the castle works to communicate. I will explain to you on another occasion why I make this request. You will possibly set it down as additional evidence of my cold-heartedness. If so you must. Would you also mind writing the business letter on an independent sheet, with a proper beginning and ending? Whether you inclose another sheet is of course optional.

“Sincerely yours,

“PAULA POWER.”

Somerset had a suspicion that her order to him not to neglect the business letter was to

escape any invidious remarks from her uncle. He wished she would be more explicit, so that he might know exactly how matters stood with them, and whether Abner Power had ever ventured to express disapproval of him as her lover.

But not knowing, he waited anxiously for a new architectural event on which he might legitimately send her another line. This occurred about a week later, when the men engaged in digging foundations discovered remains of old ones which warranted a modification of the original plan. He accordingly sent off his professional advice on the point, requesting her assent or otherwise to the amendment, winding up the inquiry with "Yours faithfully." On another sheet he wrote :

"Do you suffer from any unpleasantness in the manner of others on account of me? If so, inform me, Paula. I cannot otherwise interpret your request for the separate sheets. While on this point I will tell you what I have learnt relative to the authorship

of that false paragraph about your engagement. It was communicated to the paper by your uncle. Was the wish father to the thought, or could he have been misled, as many were, by appearances at the theatricals?

"If I am not to write to you without a professional reason, surely you can write to me without such an excuse? When you write, tell me of yourself. There is nothing I so much wish to hear of. Write a great deal about your daily doings, that she, whose words are the sweetest to me in the world, may express them upon the sweetest subject.

"You say nothing of having been to look at the chapel-of-ease I told you of, the plans of which I made when an architect's pupil, working in *mètres* instead of feet and inches, to my immense perplexity, that the drawings might be understood by the foreign workmen. Go there and tell me what you think of its design. I can assure you that every curve thereof is my own.

"How I wish you would invite me to run over and see you, if only for a day or two, for my heart runs after you in a most distracted

manner. Dearest, you entirely fill my life ! But I forget ; we have resolved not to go *very far*. But the fact is I am half afraid lest, with such reticence, you should not remember how very much I am yours, and with what a dogged constancy I shall always remember you. Paula, sometimes I have horrible misgivings that something will divide us, especially if we do not make a more distinct show of our true relationship. True do I say ? I mean the relationship which I think exists between us, but which you do not affirm too clearly.—Yours always.”

Away southward like the swallow went the tender lines. He wondered if she would notice his hint of being ready to pay her a flying visit, if permitted to do so. His fancy dwelt on that further side of France, the very contours of whose shore were now lines of beauty for him. He prowled in the library, and found interest in the mustiest facts relating to that place, learning with æsthetic pleasure that the number of its population was fifty thousand, that the mean temperature

of its atmosphere was 60° Fahrenheit, and that the peculiarities of a mistral were far from agreeable.

He waited over long for her reply ; but it ultimately came. After the usual business preliminary, she said :—

“ As requested, I have visited the little church you designed. It gave me great pleasure to stand before a building whose outline and details had come from the brain of such a valued friend and adviser.”

(“ Valued friend and adviser,” repeated Somerset critically.)

“ I like the style much, especially that of the windows—Early English are they not ? I am going to attend service there next Sunday, *because you were the architect, and for no godly reason at all.* Does that content you ? Fie for your despondency ! Remember M. Aurelius : ‘ This is the chief thing : Be not perturbed ; for all things are of the nature of the Universal.’ Indeed I am a little surprised at your having forebodings, after my assurance to you before I left. I

have none. My opinion is that, to be happy, it is necessary not to think any place more agreeable than the one where we happen to be. . . , You are too faint-hearted, and that's the truth of it. I advise you not to abandon yourself to idolatry too readily; you know what I mean. It fills me with remorse when I think how very far below such a position my actual worth removes me.

"I should like to receive another letter from you as soon as you have got over the misgiving you speak of, but don't write too soon. I wish I could write anything to raise your spirits, but you may be so perverse that if, in order to do this, I tell you of the races, routs, scenery, gaities, and gambling going on in this place and neighbourhood (into which of course I cannot help being a little drawn), you may declare that my words make you worse than ever. Don't pass the line I have set down in the way you were tempted to do in your last; and not too many Dear-ests—at least as yet. This is not a time for effusion. You have my very warm affection, and that's enough for the present."

As a love-letter this missive was tantalising enough, but since its form was simply a continuation of what she had practised before she left, and not a change from that practice, it produced no undue misgiving in him. Far more was he impressed by her omitting to answer the two important questions he had put to her. First, concerning her uncle's attitude towards them, and his conduct in giving such strange information to the reporter. Second, on his, Somerset's, paying her a flying visit some time during the spring. But he was not the man to force opinion on these points, or on any others ; and since she had requested it, he made no haste in his reply. When penned, it ran in the words subjoined, which, in common with every line of their correspondence, acquired from the strangeness of subsequent circumstances an interest and a force that perhaps they did not intrinsically possess.

“ People cannot ” (he wrote) “ be for ever in good spirits on this gloomy side of the Channel, even though you seem to be so on

yours. However, that I can abstain from letting you know whether my spirits are good or otherwise, I will prove in our future correspondence. I admire you more and more, both for the warm feeling towards me which I firmly believe you have, and for your ability to maintain side by side with it so much dignity and resolution with regard to foolish sentiment. Sometimes I think I could have put up with a little more weakness if it had brought with it a little more romantic tenderness, but I dismiss all that when I mentally survey your other qualities. I have thought of fifty things to say to you of the *too far* sort, not one of any other; how unfortunate then is your prohibition, by which I am doomed to say things that do not rise spontaneously to my lips, but have to be made, shaped, and fashioned! You say that our shut-up feelings are not to be mentioned yet. How long is the yet to last?

“But, to speak more solemnly, matters grow very serious with us, Paula—at least with me; and there are times when this restraint is really unbearable. It is possible

to put up with reserve and circumspection when the reserved and circumspect being is by one's side, for the eyes may reveal what the lips do not. But when absence is super-added, what was piquancy becomes harshness, tender railleries become cruel sarcasm, and tacit understandings misunderstandings. However that may be, you shall never be able to reproach me for touchiness. I still esteem you as a friend; I admire you and love you as a woman. This I shall always continue to do, however undemonstrative and unconfiding you prove."

CHAPTER II.

WITHOUT knowing it, Somerset was drawing near to a crisis in this soft correspondence which would speedily put his assertions to the test; but the knowledge came upon him soon enough for his peace.

Her next letter, dated March 9th, was the shortest of all he had received, and beyond the portion devoted to the building-works it contained only the following sentences:—

“I am almost angry with you, George, for being vexed because I will not make you a formal confession. Why should the verbal *I love you* be such a precious phrase? During the seven or eight months that you have been endeavouring to ascertain my sentiments you must have fairly well discovered them.

You have discovered my regard for you, what more can you desire? Would a reiterated confession of passion really do any good? Instead of pressing a lady upon this point, you should endeavour to conceal from her the progress of her interest in you. You should contrive to deeply involve her heart before she perceives your designs; hiding her, as it were, from her own observation. Then, on your side, can one imagine a situation more charming than that of perceiving a woman interested, without herself being exactly conscious of the depth of her interest! What a triumph, to rejoice in secret over what she will not recognise! This is what I should style pleasure indeed. Women labour under great difficulties: believe me that a declaration of love is always a mortifying circumstance to us, and it is a natural instinct to retain the power of obliging a man to hope, fear, pray, and beseech as long as we think fit, before we confess to a reciprocal affection.

“I am now going to own to a weakness about which I had intended to keep silent.

It will not perhaps add to your respect for me. My uncle, whom in many ways I like, is displeased with me for keeping up this correspondence so regularly. I am quite perverse enough to venture to disregard his feelings; but considering the relationship, and his kindness in other respects, I should prefer not to do so at present. Honestly speaking, I want the courage to resist him in some things. He said to me the other day that he was very much surprised that I did not depend upon his judgment for my future happiness. Whether that meant much or little, I have resolved to communicate with you only by telegrams for the remainder of the time we are here. Please reply by the same means only. There, now, don't flush and call me names! It is for the best, and we want no nonsense, you and I. I feel more than I say, and if I do not speak more plainly, you will understand what is behind after all I have hinted. I can promise you that you will not like me less upon knowing me better. Hope ever. I would give up a good deal for you. Good-bye!"

This brought Somerset some cheerfulness and a good deal of gloom. He silently reproached her; who was apparently so independent, for lacking independence in such a vital matter. Perhaps it was mere sex, perhaps it was peculiar to a few, that her independence and courage, like Cleopatra's, failed her occasionally at the last moment.

One curious impression which had often haunted him now returned with redoubled force. He could not see himself as the husband of Paula Power in any likely future. He could not imagine her his wife. People were apt to run into mistakes in their presentiments; but though he could picture her as queening it over him, as avowing her love for him unreservedly, even as compromising herself for him, he could not see her in a state of domesticity with him.

Telegrams being commanded, to the telegraph he repaired, when, after two days, an immediate wish to communicate with her led him to dismiss vague conjecture on the future situation. His first telegram took the following form:—

"I give up the letter-writing. I will part with anything to please you but yourself. Your comfort with your relative is the first thing to be considered: not for the world do I wish you to make divisions within doors.—Yours."

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday passed, and on Saturday a telegram came in reply:—

"I can fear, grieve at, and complain of nothing, having your nice promise to consider my comfort always."

This was very pretty; but it admitted little. Such short messages were in themselves poor substitutes for letters, but their speed and easy frequency were good qualities which the letters did not possess. Three days later he replied:—

"You do not once say to me 'Come.' Would such a strange accident as my arrival disturb you much?"

She replied rather quickly:—

"I am indisposed to answer you too clearly. Keep your heart strong: 'tis a censorious world."

The vagueness there shown made Somer-

set peremptory, and he could not help replying somewhat more impetuously than usual :—

“ Why do you give me so much cause for anxiety? Why treat me to so much mystification? Say once, distinctly, that what I have asked is given.”

He waited for the answer, one day, two days, a week; but none came. It was now the end of March, and when Somerset walked of an afternoon by the river and pool in the lower part of the grounds, his ear newly greeted by the small voices of frogs and toads and other creatures who had been torpid through the winter, he became doubtful and uneasy that she alone should be silent in the awakening year.

He waited through a second week, and there was still no reply. It was possible that the urgency of his request had tempted her to punish him, and he continued his walks, to, fro, and around, with as close an ear to the undertones of nature, and as attentive an eye to the charms of his own art, as the grand passion would allow. Now came the

days of battle between winter and spring. On these excursions, though spring was to the forward during the daylight, winter would reassert itself at night, and not unfrequently at other moments. Tepid airs and nipping breezes met on the confines of sunshine and shade ; trembling raindrops that were still akin to frost crystals dashed themselves from the bushes as he pursued his way from town to castle ; the birds were like an orchestra waiting for the signal to strike up, and colour began to enter into the country round.

But he gave only a modicum of thought to these proceedings. He rather thought such things as, "She can afford to be saucy, and to find a source of blitheness in my attachment, considering the power that wealth gives her to pick and choose almost where she will." He was bound to own, however, that one of the charms of her conversation was the complete absence of the note of the heiress from its accents. That, other things equal, her interest would naturally incline to a person bearing the name of De Stancy,

was evident from her avowed predilections. His original assumption, that she was a personification of the modern spirit, who had been dropped, like a seed from the bill of a bird, into a chink of mediævalism, required some qualification. It had been based on her bold flights of thought, and her original innovations. But romanticism, which will exist in every human breast as long as human nature itself exists, had asserted itself in her. Veneration for things old, not because of any merit in them, but because of their long continuance, had developed in her; and her modern spirit was taking to itself wings and flying away. Whether his image was flying with the other was a question which moved him all the more deeply now that her silence gave him dread of an affirmative answer.

But he refused to give credit for more than brief spaces to those signs which at other moments convinced him that her passing fancy for him was declining like a summer day. Like other emotional natures, he was much more disposed to abandon himself blindly to his own passion than to reason out the grounds of a waning in hers.

For another seven days he stoically left in suspension all forecasts of his possibly grim fate in being the employed and not the beloved. The week passed: he telegraphed: there was no reply: he had sudden fears for her personal safety and resolved to break her command by writing.

“Stancy Castle, April 13.

“DEAR PAULA,

“Are you ill or in trouble? It is impossible in the very unquiet state you have put me into by your silence that I should abstain from writing. Without affectation, you sorely distress me, and I think you would hardly have done it could you know what a degree of anxiety you cost me. All the misgivings I had at your parting are nothing to those I feel since you have ceased to communicate. Why, Paula, do you not write or send to me? What have I done that you should treat me thus? Do write, if it is only to reproach me. I would rather have sharp words from your pen than none. I am compelled to pass the greater part of

the day in a place which breathes constantly of you, but where you can no longer be found. To be honest in my supervision of what I have undertaken for you I must stay here, and the possibility of softening my disquietude by change of scene is thus denied me. I am unfortunate indeed that you have not been able to find half an hour during the last month to tell me at least that you are alive. I cannot help saying that your injustice and cruelty are extreme. How much misery would you not have saved me had you, when I first knew you, but shown as little tenderness as, according to appearances, you have latterly felt for me. You have always been ambiguous, it is true; but I thought I read encouragement in your eyes; encouragement certainly was in your eyes, and who would not have been deluded by them and have believed them sincere? It is difficult to learn to suspect the sincerity of one we admire. You charmed me by the sweetness of your manners, and my violent inclination led me on. The consequences of a love which, at the beginning was so plea-

sant and blissful, are now a ruinous disgust with everything I used to take an interest in, and I cannot say where it will end.

"You may say that in loving you, and being encouraged by you for a time, I have enjoyed transcendent pleasures, which are a fair return without further expectations. But consider what a price I pay for them now! Ask yourself if I may not pay too dearly. Had I resisted you; had I exerted my reason in opposition to the predilection I felt for you, then you might have had a right to punish me. But I did no such thing. There may, of course, be some deliberate scheming on the part of your relatives to intercept our communications; but I cannot think it. I know that the housekeeper has received a letter from your aunt this very week, in which she incidentally mentions that all are well, and in the same place as before. How then can I excuse you?"

"Then write, Paula, or at least telegraph, as you proposed. Otherwise I am resolved to take your silence as a signal for discontinuing our avowals, to treat your fair words as wind, and to write to you no more."

CHAPTER III.

HE despatched the letter, and half an hour afterwards felt sure that it would mortally offend her. But he had now reached a state of temporary indifference, and could contemplate the loss of such a tantalising property with reasonable calm.

In the interim of waiting for a reply he was one day walking to Markton, when, passing Myrtle Villa, he saw Sir William De Stancy ambling about his garden-path and examining the crocuses that palisaded its edge. Sir William saw him and asked him to come in. Somerset was in the mood for any diversion from his own affairs, and they seated themselves by the drawing-room fire.

"I am much alone now," said Sir William, "and if the weather were not very mild, so that I can get out into the garden every day, I should feel it a great deal."

"You allude to your daughter's absence?"

"And my son's. Strange to say, I do not miss her so much as I miss him. She offers to return at any moment; but I do not wish to deprive her of the advantages of a little foreign travel with her friend. Always, Mr. Somerset, give your spare time to foreign countries, especially those which contrast with your own in topography, language, and art. That's my advice to all young people of your age. Don't waste your money on expensive amusements at home. Practise the strictest economy at home, to have a margin for going abroad."

Economy, which Sir William had never practised, but to which, after exhausting all other practices, he now raised an altar, as the Athenians did to the unknown God, was a topic likely to prolong itself on the baronet's lips, and Somerset contrived to interrupt him by asking:

"Captain De Stancy, too, has gone? Has the artillery, then, left the barracks?"

"No," said Sir William. "But my son has made use of his leave in running over to see his sister at Nice."

The current of quiet meditation in Somerset changed to a busy whirl at this unexpected reply. Here was the key to her silence. That Paula should become indifferent to his existence from a sense of superiority, physical, spiritual, or social, was a sufficiently ironical thing; but that she should have relinquished him because of the presence of a rival fired him with indignation.

Sir William, noting nothing, continued in the tone of clever childishness which characterised him: "It is very singular how the present situation has been led up to by me. Policy, and policy alone, has been the rule of my conduct for many years past; and when I say that I have saved my family by it, I believe time will show that I am within the truth. I hope you don't let your passions outrun your policy, as so many young men are apt to do. Better be poor and politic,

than rich and headstrong : that's the opinion of an old man. However, I was going to say that it was purely from policy that I allowed a friendship to develop between my daughter and Miss Power, and now events are proving the wisdom of my course. Straws show how the wind blows, and there are little signs that my son Captain De Stancy will return to Stancy Castle by the fortunate step of marrying its owner. I say nothing to either of them, and they say nothing to me ; but my wisdom lies in doing nothing to hinder such a consummation, despite inherited prejudices."

Somerset had quite time enough to rein himself in during the old gentleman's locution, and the voice in which he answered was so cold and reckless that it did not seem his own : " But how will they live happily together when she is a dissenter, and a radical, and a New-light, and a Neo-Greek, and a person of red blood ; while Captain De Stancy is the reverse of them all ! "

" I anticipate no difficulty on that score," said the baronet. " My son's star lies in that

direction, and, like the Magi, he is following it without trifling with his opportunity. You have skill in architecture, therefore you follow it. My son has skill in gallantry, and now he is about to profitably exercise it."

"May nobody wish him more harm in that exercise than I do!" said Somerset fervently.

A stagnant moodiness of several hours which followed his visit to Myrtle Villa, and the intelligence there acquired, resulted in a temper to which he had been warming for some time. It was to journey over to Paula the very next day, and unravel the whole mystery face to face with her. He now felt perfectly convinced that the inviting of Captain De Stancy to visit them at Nice was a second stage in the scheme of Paula's uncle, the premature announcement of her marriage having been the first. Somerset was not so blinded by his heart but that he could see what an attraction the union would have for a frigid calculator whose thoughts were like geometrical diagrams. The roundness and neatness of the whole plan could not fail

to recommend it to the mind which delighted in putting involved things straight, and such a mind Abner Power's seemed to be. In fact, the felicity, in a politic sense, of pairing the captain with the heiress furnished no little excuse for manœuvring to bring it about, so long as that manœuvring fell short of unfairness, which Mr. Power's could scarcely be said to do.

The next day was spent in furnishing the builders with such instructions as they might require for a coming week or ten days, and in dropping a short note to Paula ; ending as follows :—

“ I am coming to see you. Possibly you will refuse me an interview. Never mind, I am coming.—Yours,

“ G. SOMERSET.”

The morning after that he was up and away. Between him and Paula stretched nine hundred miles by the line of journey that he found it necessary to adopt, namely, by way of London, in order to inform his father of his movements and to make one or

two business calls. The afternoon was passed in attending to these matters, the night in speeding onward, and by the time that nine o'clock sounded next morning through the sunless and leaden air of the English Channel coasts, he had reduced the number of miles on his list by two hundred, and cut off the sea from the impediments between him and Paula.

Although his haste had involved an unpleasant night-passage he did not wait for rest, pressing onward at once to Paris, which he reached about noon. At present it was not the blithe and beautiful city that it had formerly been to him, but a stage marking three hundred and fifty miles as the number cleared off his score. He dined at an hotel without waiting for the regular *table d'hôte*, and about seven o'clock the same evening moved out of Paris on his southerly course, up the valley of the Seine and through the vine slopes of Burgundy. On awakening from a fitful sleep in the grey dawn of the next morning he looked out upon the great city whose name associates silk, in the fantastic

imagination, with some of the ghastliest atrocities, Protestant, Catholic, and Revolutionary, that the civilised world has beheld. But all in Lyons was quiet enough now, the citizens being unaroused as yet even to the daily round of bread-winning, and enveloped in a haze of fog.

Six hundred and fifty miles of his journey had now been got over; there still intervened two hundred and fifty between him and the end of suspense. When he thought of that he was disinclined to pause; and pressed on by the same train, which set him down at Marseilles at mid-day.

Here he considered. By going on to Nice that afternoon he would arrive at too late an hour to call upon her at the hotel the same evening: it would therefore be advisable to sleep in Marseilles and proceed the next morning to his journey's end, so as to meet her in a brighter and more refreshed condition than he could boast of to-day. This he accordingly did, and leaving Marseilles the next morning about eight, found himself at Nice early in the afternoon.

Now that he was actually at the centre of his gravitation he seemed even further away from a feasible meeting with her than in England. While afar off, his presence at Nice had appeared to be the one thing needful for the solution of his trouble, but the very house fronts seemed now to ask him what right he had there. Unluckily, in writing from England, he had not allowed her time to reply before his departure, so that he did not know what difficulties might lie in the way of her seeing him privately. Before deciding what to do, he walked down the Avenue de la Gare to the Promenade between the shore and the Jardin Public, and sat down to think.

The hotel which she had given him as her address looked right out upon him and the sea beyond, and he rested there with the pleasing hope that her eyes might glance from a window and discover his form. Everything in the scene was sunny and gay. Behind him in the gardens a band was playing ; before him was the sea, the Great Sea, the historical and original Mediterranean ;

the sea of innumerable characters in history and legend that arranged themselves before him in a long frieze of memories so diverse as to include both Æneas and St. Paul.

Northern eyes are not prepared on a sudden for the impact of such images of warmth and colour as meet them southward, or for the vigorous light that falls from the sky of this favoured shore. In any other circumstances the transparency and serenity of the air, the perfume of the sea, the radiant houses, the palms and flowers, would have acted upon Somerset as an enchantment, and wrapped him in a reverie ; but at present he only saw and felt these things as through a thick glass which kept out half their atmosphere.

At last he made up his mind. He would take up his quarters at her hotel, and catch echoes of her and her people, to learn somehow if their attitude towards him as a lover were actually hostile, before formally encountering them. Under this crystalline light, full of gaieties, sentiment, languor, seductiveness, and ready-made romance, the

memory of a solitary unimportant man in the lugubrious North might have faded from her mind. He was only her hired designer. He was an artist ; but he had been engaged by her, and was not a volunteer; and she did not as yet know that he meant to accept no return for his labours but the pleasure of presenting them to her as a love-offering.

So off he went at once towards the imposing building whither his letters had preceded him. Owing to a press of visitors there was a moment's delay before he could be attended to at the bureau, and he turned to the large staircase that confronted him, momentarily hoping that her figure might descend. Her dress must indeed have brushed the carpeting of those steps scores of times. She must have gone in and out of this portico daily. He now went to the hostess at the desk, engaged his room, ordered his luggage to be sent for, and finally inquired for the party he sought.

"They left Nice yesterday, monsieur," replied madame.

Was she quite sure, Somerset asked her ?

Yes, she was quite sure. Two of the hotel carriages had driven them to the station.

Did she know where they had gone to ?

This and other inquiries resulted in the information that they had gone to the hotel at Monte Carlo ; that how long they were going to stay there, and whether they were coming back again, was not known. His final question whether Miss Power had received a letter from England which must have arrived the day previous was answered in the affirmative.

Somerset's first and sudden resolve was to cancel his engagement to stay here for the night, and to follow on after them to the hotel named ; but he finally decided to make his immediate visit to Monte Carlo only a cautious reconnoitre, returning to Nice to sleep.

Accordingly, after an early dinner, he again set forth through the broad Avenue de la Gare, and an hour on the coast railway brought him to the beautiful and sinister little spot to which the Power and De Stancy

party had strayed in common with the rest of the frivolous throng.

He assumed that their visit thither would be chiefly one of curiosity, and therefore not prolonged. This proved to be the case in even greater measure than he had anticipated. On inquiry at the hotel he learnt that they had stayed only one night, leaving a short time before his arrival, though it was believed that some of the party were still in the town.

Somerset could not discover in which direction they had gone, and in a state of indecision he strolled into the gardens of the Casino, and looked out upon the sea. There it still lay, calm yet lively ; of an unmixed blue, yet variegated ; hushed, but articulate even to melodiousness. Everything about and around this coast appeared indeed jaunty, tuneful, and at ease, reciprocating with heartiness the rays of the splendid sun ; everything, except himself. The palms and the flowers on the terraces before him were undisturbed by a single cold breath. The marble-work of parapets and steps was unsplintered by

frosts. The whole was like a conservatory with the sky for its dome.

For want of other occupation he presently strolled round towards the public entrance to the Casino, and ascended the great staircase into the pillared hall. It was possible, after all, that after leaving the hotel and sending on their luggage they had taken another turn through the rooms, to follow by a later train. With more than curiosity, then, he scanned first the reading-rooms, only however to see not a face that he knew. He then crossed the vestibule to the gaming-tables.

CHAPTER IV.

HERE he was confronted by a heated phantasmagoria of tainted splendour and a high pressure of suspense that seemed to make the air quiver. A low whisper of conversation prevailed, which might probably have been not wrongly defined as the lowest note of social harmony.

The people gathered at this negative pole of industry had come from all civilised countries; their tongues were familiar with many forms of utterance, that of each racial group or type being unintelligible in its subtler variations, if not entirely, to the rest. But the language of *meum* and *tuum* they collectively comprehended without translation. In a half-charmed spell-bound state they had congregated in knots, standing, or sitting in hollow circles round the notorious

oval tables marked with figures and lines. The eyes of all these sets of people were watching the Roulette. Somerset went from table to table, looking among the loungers rather than among the regular players, for faces, or at least for one face, which did not meet his gaze, there passing into his ears the while a confusion of sentences : " Messieurs, faites le jeu ! " " Le jeu est-il fait ? " " Rien ne va plus ! " " Vingt-quatre. " " Noir. " " Pair et Passe, " from the lips of the croupiers.

The suggestive charm which the centuries-old impersonality Gaming, rather than games and gamblers, had for Somerset, led him to loiter on even when his hope of meeting any of the Power and De Stancy party had vanished. As a non-participant in its profits and losses, fevers and frenzies, it had that stage effect upon his imagination which is usually exercised over those who behold Chance presented to them with spectacular piquancy without advancing far enough in its acquaintance to suffer from its ghastly reprisals and impish tricks, that strip it of all romance.

He beheld a hundred diametrically opposed wishes issuing from the murky intelligences around a table, and spreading down across each other upon the figured diagram in their midst, each to its own number. It was a network of hopes; which at the announcement, "Sept, Rouge, Impair, et Manque," disappeared like magic gossamer, to be replaced in a moment by new. That all the people there, including himself, could be interested in what to the eye of perfect reason was a somewhat monotonous thing—the property of numbers to recur at certain longer or shorter intervals in a machine containing them—in other words, the blind groping after fractions of a result the whole of which was well known—was one testimony among many of the powerlessness of logic when confronted with imagination. In some of the gamblers there was an intense-ness that reached the point of ferocity; in others a feline patience that was even less admirable. But these symptoms were after all secondary. The broad aspect of nearly every one was that of well-mannered calm,

and a cursory view of the faces alone would have discovered nothing strongly contrasting with those of a mixed congregation listening to a church sermon. If they were all worshippers of Belial, they seemed to find that word quite as sustaining as the blessed Mesopotamia and its kin.

At this juncture our loungeer discerned at one of the tables about the last person in the world he could have wished to encounter there. It was Dare, whom he had supposed to be a thousand miles off, hanging about the purlieus of Markton.

Dare was seated beside a table in an attitude of application, which seemed to imply that he had come early and engaged in this pursuit in a systematic manner. Somerset had never witnessed Dare and De Stancy together, neither had he heard of any engagement of Dare by the travelling party as artist, courier, or otherwise ; and yet it crossed his mind that Dare might have had something to do with them, or at least have seen them. This possibility was enough to overmaster Somerset's reluctance to speak to

the young man, and he did so as soon as an opportunity occurred.

Dare's face was as rigid and dry as if it had been encrusted with plaster, and he was like one turned into a computing machine which no longer had the power of feeling. He recognised Somerset as indifferently as if he had met him in the ward of Stancy Castle, and replying to his remarks by a word or two, concentrated on the game anew.

"Are you here alone?" said Somerset presently.

"Quite alone." There was a silence, till Dare added, "But I have seen some friends of yours." He again became absorbed in the events of the table. Somerset retreated a few steps, and pondered the question whether Dare could know where they had gone. He disliked to be beholden to Dare for information, but he would give a great deal to know. While pausing he watched Dare's play. He staked only five-franc pieces, but it was done with an assiduity worthy of larger coin. At every half-minute or so he placed his money on a certain spot, and as

regularly had the mortification of seeing it swept away by the croupier's rake. After a while he varied his procedure. He risked his money, which from the look of his face seemed rather to have dwindled than increased, less recklessly against long odds than before. Leaving off backing numbers *en plein*, he laid his venture upon two columns *à cheval*; then tried it upon the dozens; then upon two numbers; then upon a square; and, apparently getting nearer and nearer defeat, at last upon the simple chances of even or odd, over or under, red or black. Yet with a few fluctuations in his favour fortune bore steadily against him, till he could breast her blows no longer. He rose from the table and came towards Somerset, and they both moved on together into the entrance-hall.

Dare was at that moment the victim of an intolerably overpowering mania for more money. His presence in the South of Europe had its origin, as may be guessed, in Captain De Stancy's journey in the same direction, whom he had followed, and occasionally

troubled with persistent requests for more funds, though carefully keeping out of sight of Paula and the rest. His dream of involving Paula in the De Stancy pedigree knew no abatement. But Somerset had by accident lighted upon him at an instant when his chronic idea, though not displaced, was overwhelmed by a temporary rage for continuing play. He was so possessed with this desire that, in a hope of being able to gratify it by Somerset's aid, he was prepared to do almost anything to please the architect.

"You asked me," said Dare, stroking his impassive brow, "if I had seen anything of the Powers. I have seen them; and if I can be of any use to you in giving information about them I shall only be too glad."

"What information can you give?"

"I can tell you where they are gone to."

"Where?"

"To the Grand Hotel, Genoa. They went on there this afternoon."

"Whom do you refer to by they?"

"Mrs. Goodman, Mr. Power, Miss Power, Miss De Stancy, and the worthy captain."

He leaves them to-morrow : he comes back here for a day on his way to England."

Somerset was silent. Dare continued : " Now I have done you a favour, will you do me one in return ? "

Somerset looked toward the gaming-rooms, and said dubiously, " Well ? "

" Lend me two hundred francs."

" Yes," said Somerset ; " but on one condition : that I don't give them to you till you are inside the hotel you are staying at."

" That can't be ; it's at Nice."

" Well, I am going back to Nice, and I'll lend you the money the instant we get there."

" But I want it here, now, instantly ! " cried Dare ; and for the first time there was a wiry unreasonableness in his voice that fortified his companion more firmly than ever in his determination to lend the young man no money whilst he remained inside that building.

" You want it to throw it away. I don't approve of it ; so come with me."

" But," said Dare, " I arrived here with a hundred napoleons and more, expressly to

work out my theory of chances and recurrences, which is sound ; I have studied it hundreds of times by the help of this." He partially drew from his pocket the little volume that we have before seen in his hands. " If I only persevere in my system, the certainty that I must win is almost mathematical. I have staked and lost two hundred and thirty-three times. Allowing out of that one chance in every thirty-six (which is the average of zero being marked), and two hundred and four times for the backers of the other numbers, I have the mathematical expectation of six times at least, which would nearly recoup me. And shall I, then, sacrifice that vast foundation of waste chances that I have laid down, and paid for, merely for want of a little ready money ? "

" You might persevere for a twelvemonth, and still not get the better of your reverses. Time tells in favour of the bank. Just imagine for the sake of argument that all the people who have ever placed a stake upon a certain number to be one person playing continuously. Has that imaginary person won ?

The existence of the bank is a sufficient answer."

"But a particular player has the option of leaving off at any point favourable to himself, which the bank has not; and there's my opportunity."

"Which from your mood you will be sure not to take advantage of."

"I shall go on playing," said Dare, doggedly.

"Not with my money."

"Very well; we won't part as enemies," replied Dare, with the flawless politeness of a man whose speech has no longer any kinship with his feelings. "Shall we share a bottle of wine? You will not? Well, I hope your luck with your lady will be more magnificent than mine has been here; but—mind Captain De Stancy! he's a fearful wild fowl for you."

"He's a harmless, inoffensive officer, as far as I know. If he is not—let him be what he may for me."

"And do his worst to cut you out, I suppose?"

"Ay—if you will." Somerset, much against

his judgment, was being stimulated by these pricks into words of irritation. "Captain De Stancy might, I think, be better employed than in dangling at the heels of a lady who can well dispense with his company. And you might be better employed than in wasting your wages here."

"Wages—a fit word for my money. May I ask you at what stage in the appearance of a man whose way of existence is unknown his money ceases to be called wages and begins to be called means?"

Somerset turned and left him without replying, Dare following his receding figure with a look of ripe resentment, not less likely to vent itself in mischief from the want of moral ballast in him who emitted it. He then fixed a nettled and unsatisfied gaze upon the gaming-rooms, and in another minute or two left the Casino also.

Dare and Somerset met no more that day. The latter returned to Nice by the evening train and went straight to the hotel. He now thanked his fortune that he had not precipitately given up his room there, for a tele-

gram from Paula awaited him. His hand almost trembled as he opened it, to read the following few short words, dated from the Grand Hotel, Genoa.

"Letter received. Am glad to hear of your journey. We are not returning to Nice, but stay here a week. I direct this at a venture."

This tantalising message—the first breaking of her recent silence—was saucy, almost cruel, in its dry frigidity. It led him to give up his idea of following at once to Genoa. That was what she obviously expected him to do, and it was possible that his non-arrival might draw a letter or message from her of a sweeter composition than this. That would at least be the effect of his tardiness if she cared in the least for him; if she did not he could bear the worst. The argument was good enough as far as it went, but, like many more, failed from the narrowness of its premises, the contingent intervention of Dare being entirely undreamt of. It was altogether a fatal miscalculation, which cost him dear.

Passing by the telegraph-office in the Rue Pont-Neuf at an early hour the next morn-

ing he saw Dare coming out from the door. It was Somerset's momentary impulse to thank Dare for the information given as to Paula's whereabouts, information which had now proved true. But Dare did not seem to appreciate his friendliness, and after a few words of studied civility the young man moved on.

And well he might. Five minutes before that time he had thrown open a gulf of treachery between himself and the architect which nothing in life could ever close. Before leaving the telegraph-office Dare had despatched the following message to Paula direct, as a set-off against what he called Somerset's ingratitude for valuable information, though it was really the fruit of many passions, motives, and desires :

"G. Somerset, Nice, to Miss Power, Grand Hotel, Genoa.

"Have lost all at Monte Carlo. Have learnt that Capt. D. S. returns here to-morrow. Please send me one hundred pounds by him, and save me from disgrace. Will await him at eleven o'clock and four, on the Pont-Neuf."

CHAPTER V.

FIVE hours after the despatch of that telegram Captain De Stancy was rattling along the coast railway of the Riviera from Genoa to Nice. He was returning to England by way of Marseilles ; but before turning northwards he had engaged to perform on Miss Power's account a peculiar and somewhat disagreeable duty. This was to place in Somerset's hands a hundred and twenty-five napoleons which had been demanded from her by a message in Somerset's name. The money was in his pocket—all in gold, in a canvas bag, tied up by Paula's own hands, which he had observed to tremble as she tied it.

As he leaned in the corner of the carriage he was thinking over the events of the morn-

ing which had culminated in that liberal response. At ten o'clock, before he had gone out from the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, which was not the same as the one patronised by Paula and her friends, he had been summoned to her presence in a manner so unexpected as to imply that something serious was in question. On entering her room he had been struck by the absence of that saucy independence usually apparent in her bearing towards him, notwithstanding the persistency with which he had hovered near her for the previous month, and gradually, by the position of his sister, and the favour of Paula's uncle in intercepting one of Somerset's letters and several of his telegrams, established himself as an intimate member of the travelling party. His entry, however, this time as always, had had the effect of a tonic, and it was quite with her customary self-possession that she had told him of the object of her message.

"You think of returning to Nice this afternoon?" she inquired.

De Stancy informed her that such was his

intention, and asked if he could do anything for her there.

Then, he remembered, she had hesitated. "I have received a telegram," she said at length; and so she allowed to escape her bit by bit the information that her architect, whose name she seemed reluctant to utter, had travelled from England to Nice that week, partly to consult her, partly for a holiday trip; that he had gone on to Monte Carlo, had there lost his money and got into difficulties, and had appealed to her to help him out of them by the immediate advance of some ready cash. It was a sad case, an unexpected case, she murmured, with her eyes fixed on the window. Indeed she could not comprehend it.

To De Stancy there appeared nothing so very extraordinary in Somerset's apparent fiasco, except in so far as that he should have applied to Paula for relief from his distresses instead of elsewhere. It was a self-humiliation which a lover would have avoided at all costs, he thought. Yet after a momentary reflection on his theory of Somerset's cha-

racter, it seemed sufficiently natural that he should lean persistently on Paula, if only with a view of keeping himself linked to her memory, without thinking too profoundly of his own dignity. That the esteem in which she had held Somerset up to that hour suffered a tremendous blow by his apparent scrape was clearly visible in her, reticent as she was ; and De Stancy, while pitying Somerset, thanked him in his mind for having gratuitously given a rival an advantage which that rival's attentions had never been able to gain of themselves.

After a little further conversation she had said: "Since you are to be my messenger, I must tell you that I have decided to send the hundred pounds asked for, and you will please to deliver them into no hands but his own." A curious little blush crept over her sobered face—perhaps it was a blush of shame at the conduct of the young man in whom she had of late been suspiciously interested—as she added, "He will be on the Pont-Neuf at four this afternoon and again at eleven to-morrow. Can you meet him there?"

"Certainly," De Stancy replied.

She then asked him, rather anxiously, how he could account for Mr. Somerset knowing that he, Captain De Stancy, was about to return to Nice?

De Stancy informed her that he left word at the hotel of his intention to return, which was quite true; moreover, there did not lurk in his mind at the moment of speaking the faintest suspicion that Somerset had seen Dare.

She then tied the bag and handed it to him, leaving him with a serene and impenetrable bearing, which he hoped for his own sake meant an acquired indifference to Somerset and his fortunes. Her sending the architect a sum of money which she could easily spare might be set down to natural generosity towards a man with whom she was artistically co-operating for the improvement of her home.

She came back to him again for a moment. "Could you possibly get there before four this afternoon?" she asked, and he informed her that he could just do so by leaving

almost at once, which he was very willing to do, though by so forestalling his time he would lose the projected morning with her and the rest at the Palazzo Doria.

"I may tell you that I shall not go to the Palazzo Doria either, if it is any consolation to you to know it," was her reply. "I shall sit indoors and think of you on your journey."

The answer had admitted of two translations, but her manner had inclined him to the inference that her reason for abstaining from a visit to the palace was his enforced abandonment of it, and not her mental absorption in the result of his meeting with Somerset. These retrospections and conjectures filled the gallant officer's mind during the greater part of the journey. He arrived at the hotel they had all stayed at in succession about six hours after Somerset had left it for a little excursion to San Remo and its neighbourhood, as a means of passing a few days till Paula should write again to inquire why he had not come on. Had De Stancy and Somerset met at Nice a curious explanation would have resulted; but so it was that De

Stancy saw no one he knew, and in obedience to Paula's commands he promptly set off on foot for the Pont-Neuf.

Though opposed to the architect as a lover, De Stancy felt for him as a poor devil in need of money, having had experiences of that sort himself, and he was really anxious that the needful supply entrusted to him should reach Somerset's hands. He was on the bridge five minutes before the hour, and when the clock struck a hand was laid on his shoulder : turning he beheld Dare.

Knowing that the youth was loitering somewhere along the coast, for they had frequently met together on De Stancy's previous visit, the latter merely said, "Don't bother me for the present, Willy, I have an engagement. You can see me at the hotel this evening."

"When you have given me the hundred pounds I will fly like a rocket, captain," said the young gentleman. "I keep the appointment instead of the other man."

De Stancy looked hard at him. "How—do you know about this?" he asked breathlessly.

"I have seen him."

De Stancy took the young man by the two shoulders and gazed into his eyes. The scrutiny seemed not altogether to remove the suspicion which had suddenly started up in his mind. "My soul," he said, dropping his arms, "can this be true?"

"What?"

"You know."

Dare shrugged his shoulders; "Are you going to hand over the money or no?" he said.

"I am going to make inquiries," said De Stancy, walking away with a vehement tread.

"Captain, you are without natural affection," said Dare, walking by his side, in a tone which showed his fear that he had over-estimated that emotion. "See what I have done for you. You have been my constant care and anxiety for I can't tell how long. I have stayed awake at night thinking how I might best give you a good start in the world by arranging this judicious marriage, when you have been sleeping as sound as a top with no cares upon your mind at all, and

now I have got into a scrape—as the most thoughtful of us may sometimes—you go to make inquiries.”

“I have promised the lady to whom this money belongs—whose generosity has been shamefully abused in some way—that I will deliver it into no hands but those of one man, and he has not yet appeared. I therefore go to find him.”

Dare laid his hand upon De Stancy’s arm. “Captain, we are both warm, and punctilious on points of honour ; this will come to a split between us if we don’t mind. So, not to bring matters to a crisis, lend me ten pounds here to enable me to get home, and I’ll disappear.”

In a state bordering on distraction, eager to get the young man out of his sight before worse revelations should rise up between them, De Stancy without pausing in his walk gave him the sum demanded. He soon reached the post-office, where he inquired if a Mr. Somerset had left any directions for forwarding letters.

It was just what Somerset had done. De

Stancy was told that Mr. Somerset had commanded that any letters should be sent on to him at the Hôtel Victoria, San Remo.

It was now evident that the scheme of getting money from Paula was either of Dare's invention, or that Somerset, ashamed of his first impulse, had abandoned it as speedily as it had been formed. De Stancy turned and went out. Dare, in keeping with his promise, had vanished. Captain De Stancy resolved to do nothing in the case till further events should enlighten him, beyond sending a line to Miss Power to inform her that Somerset had not appeared, and that he therefore retained the money till further instructions.

END OF VOL. II.

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